



3

SHIMESABA

Illustration by booota

HOUSE HIGEHIRO

After Being Rejected, I Shaved
and Took in a High School Runaway



3

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Illustration by booota

HIGEHIRO

After Being Rejected, I Shaved
and Took in a High School Runaway

A high school girl with dark hair and bangs, wearing a blue dress with white sleeves, is shown from the waist up. She is smiling and looking down at her hands, which are clasped together. The background is a bright, sunny outdoor setting with a railing visible.

“I think
I wanna go
if you’ll
go with
me. To the
summer
festival,
that is.”

Sayu

A high school
runaway currently
living with
Yoshida.

An anime-style illustration of a young woman with short, dark, wavy hair and large, expressive eyes. She is wearing a purple short-sleeved shirt over a white long-sleeved shirt, and a blue lanyard with a silver ID badge around her neck. She has a watch on her left wrist and is standing with her hands on her hips, looking slightly to the side with a gentle smile. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue and white.

*"My name is
Ao Kanda,
and I've
transferred
here from
the Sendai
branch. It's
very nice
to meet
everyone."*

**Ao
Kanda**

Yoshida's
high school
ex-girlfriend.



"I feel
bad you
have
so few
friends,
so I'll
go ahead
and add
in my
info."

**Yuzuha
Mishima**

A new office worker
being mentored by

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Afterword

Airi Gotou

Yoshida's
superior and the
object of his
one-sided
affections for
the past
five years.

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"It's because I love him
that I think it's pointless
to do anything."



HIGEHIRO

*After Being Rejected, I Shaved
and Took in a High School Runaway*

3

SHIMESABA

ILLUSTRATION BY
booota

Copyright



Shimesaba

Translation by Marcus Shauer (MediBang Inc.)

Cover art by booota

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HIGE WO SORU, SOSHITE JOSHIKOUSEI WO HIROU Vol. 3

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Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Chapter 1 Falling in Love

It's been said that you fall in love with your whole heart only once in your life.

I can't remember any details, like whether I read it in a book or saw it in a movie or on TV. I just feel like I heard it once a long time ago.

A single, all-consuming love.

The idea sounds nice, but it just doesn't sit right with me.

The reason is simple: I don't understand why it has to be a onetime thing. That's what I can't get past.

I can't help feeling love is something you experience with your whole heart each and every time. I can't speak for everybody, but that's how I understand it, at least.

I've had only one relationship. It took place when I was in the eleventh grade, and the girl in question was in the year above me. I was in the baseball club at the time, and I fell for the pitcher of the girls' softball club. After a few months of agonizing over my feelings, I finally told her how I felt.

I remember her being cheerful, yet with an air of mystery. It was that duality that drew me to her, both before and after we got together.

What's more, she was wildly uninhibited. After just a few weeks of being together, she asked me to have sex like it was the natural thing to do. I hesitated, but as a high school boy, I could hardly suppress my urges when faced with an older girl I really liked asking me point-blank. I gave in to her easily.

I didn't think it was anything bad, of course. It was an unbelievable joy to share my body and heart with the person I loved, and at the time, it put me

on cloud nine. She was beautiful and popular, and I was the envy of all my friends.

However, our relationship came to an abrupt end the moment she graduated high school.

She stopped contacting me. She didn't send me any messages and didn't reply to the ones I sent her.

We were no longer able to meet, and I couldn't get in touch with her. Our relationship came to what you might call a natural end, and being a broke and busy high schooler, I was unable to pursue her. I was left heartbroken.

During the year following her graduation, I spent my days endlessly reminiscing about our time together.

I was truly in love with her, and I'd been under the impression that we would continue our relationship even after she graduated. That was the very reason I'd agreed to have sex with her. I wanted to prove to her how serious I was about us staying together.

And yet, she must not have felt the same way. Every time I thought about it, I felt empty inside. Our philosophies on love were completely incompatible, and I didn't realize it until we broke up.

The relationship ended with only painful memories, and I threw myself into my university studies and, after that, into job hunting. That was when I met Ms. Gotou.

I don't think there's any need to look back on what happened after that.

I fell fully in love again. Because I was also deeply engrossed in my work at the time, it took me quite a while to approach her with my feelings. Even so, for those five years, the intensity of what I felt for her never waned in the slightest.

This is the only kind of love I've ever felt, so the concept of a *single, all-consuming love* that happens but once in your life just doesn't resonate with me.

If you could only ever have one real, truly intense love, would that mean I'd already used up my chance with either my high school girlfriend or with Ms. Gotou?

Looking back, I couldn't say that one had been any more heartfelt than the other. The two just couldn't be compared.

In any case, this was the second time I'd really been in love. It didn't matter whether anything came of it. If someone asked me right now if I'd

ever fall in love again, I wouldn't be able to imagine it. In fact, I might even answer "no."

"Well, what about me?"

I heard a voice from behind and turned around to find Sayu, the high school girl I was living with.

"What do you think about me?"

"What do I think...?"

Sayu watched as I hesitated, then cocked her head to the side with a grin. Her hair, which fell neatly onto her shoulders, was held sleekly in place by gravity.

Sayu had appeared in my life out of the blue, and I was acting as her temporary guardian.

Our situation was unquestionably illegal, but it wasn't illicit; we didn't have any kind of physical relationship. And it wasn't like I was holding back my urges or anything—I would never harbor those kinds of feelings for her.

"But, Mr. Yoshida," said Sayu. "These days, I feel like you spend more time thinking about me than about Ms. Gotou."

It was as if she was in conversation with my inner thoughts. I looked at her, flustered.

"What are you talking about?"

"You even had the chance to bring Ms. Gotou over, but all you did was introduce her to me. That's kinda weird. The two of you could've had some alone time and, y'know, done adult stuff."

"Yeah, but..."

Mishima had said the same thing.

At the time, however, that thought had never once occurred to me. Instead, I was thinking that if Sayu was going to stay at my home, I would have to properly explain the situation to Ms. Gotou.

"Doesn't that mean—" Sayu began.

Yet again, it was as if she had taken a peek at my innermost thoughts.

"Doesn't that mean I'm the person you want to spend the rest of your life with, not Ms. Gotou?"

"Wha—? No... That's not what I—"

"C'mon, Mr. Yoshida."

Sayu smiled a little seductively before continuing.

“What am I to you, exactly?”

“—shida... Hey, c'mon. Mr. Yoshida!”

“Huh?”

Someone was shaking me. I opened my eyes, allowing bright light to mercilessly invade my field of vision.

Immediately, I looked around and saw a high school girl standing beside my bed.

“Morning.”

It was my roommate, Sayu. My vision was so hazy I couldn't make out the expression on her face, but I was sure she had on a wry smile.

“...Good morning.”

“You wouldn't wake up at all today. Usually, all I have to do is poke you a little.”

“...That bad, huh?”

“I called your name a few times, poked and patted you, but you still wouldn't wake up. I had no choice but to shake you. Sorry.”

“It's fine. I would have been late to work if you hadn't...”

My throat was parched—probably from sleeping with my mouth open—and my saliva felt thick and gross.

“Did you have a nightmare?”

“A nightmare?”

I tilted my head questioningly, and she nodded vigorously in response.



“You made some sounds like you were in pain.”

“Oh... A nightmare, huh?”

I tried to see if I could remember anything, but for some reason, my mind was a blur.

I had the strange sensation I'd been talking to someone right before I woke up, but I couldn't recall what about.

“...I don't remember.”

“Oh, huh... Anyway, get up, quick! If you don't hurry, you won't have time to eat breakfast.”

“On it.”

Seeing me sit up, Sayu gave a short nod and jogged over to the kitchen. There was an audible click as she switched on the stove and started heating the pot sitting on top of it.

Watching her from the corner of my eye, I got out of bed and had a good stretch.

Sayu had already made breakfast and set it out on the living room table. I cast another quick glance her way as she used a ladle to stir the miso soup in the pot, but she didn't notice.

Her presence had become a completely ordinary part of my life.

And yet, one day, she was going to leave. We would go back to our old lives. It would be a good thing for both of us, and it would be the right thing to do.

These were the thoughts spinning around in my mind as I got up. I shook my head. Wasn't it a bit late to be feeling uneasy? Our relationship had always been wrong. I'd known that, and I'd continued down this road anyway.

We had to get back on the right path. For Sayu's sake and for mine.

I headed straight for the bathroom and splashed my face with water.

My mind had been foggy from the moment I'd woken up, but thanks to the coldness of the water, things finally felt clear.

Chapter 2 Luxury Car

“Tch, not another one.”

Asami was sitting in the office on her break, a textbook spread out on the table in front of her.

Her sudden click of the tongue momentarily distracted me from the math problem in my own notebook.

“Huh?”

“This one right here.”

Asami turned her textbook around to show me and put her finger down on the open page. She was pointing at what appeared to be a question for Contemporary Japanese Language class. I mumbled the words aloud.

““Why did Toyotarou say the underlined words in the passage? Choose the correct answer from the choices below.’Huh? Isn’t this just a normal question?”

“Yeah, it’s a pretty common pattern.” Asami pouted, then slid the book slowly back toward herself and sighed.

“But, like, they don’t actually give the reason in the text.”

“They want you to read between the lines, right?”

“I know all that, but something still bugs me about it.”

“Do you have a hard time with these?”

Asami looked puzzled for a moment, then shook her head.

“Not at all. I’m actually good at them.”

“Then why are you complaining?”

For a moment, Asami furrowed her brow in frustration. Then she began tapping her mechanical pencil on her notebook as she continued.

“I’m not complaining because I don’t know the answer. It’s just, you know, annoying how they’re like, *Choose the correct one*, and all.”

Asami used her pencil to take a particularly emphatic stab at her notebook, then spoke a little more slowly.

“I just don’t think anyone can say what’s correct and what’s not if it’s not written down anywhere. If people don’t tell you, then you can’t know what they really think.”

I got the feeling Asami’s words had drifted away from the question in front of her toward something more abstract. She seemed to realize this herself, and, letting out a small gasp, she began speaking more quickly, trying to cover it up.

“Well, I’d get it if the author had been the one to make up the questions, but...”

“Yeah... I’m pretty sure it’s not the author who’s coming up with this stuff. I doubt they interviewed them, either.”

Information about the source of the extract was written in small letters beneath the text. I took a look at it. The author was obviously deceased.

It seemed Asami was upset at the way the textbook’s author had used the word *correct* in their question, implying they understood a character’s emotions in the story, despite the fact that they were neither the author of the work nor the character.

“The author of this novel must be rolling in his grave, thinking, *This is wack. I didn’t write none of that stuff.*”

“I don’t think they’d be talking like that, but you’re probably right.”

Asami cackled, then slammed the textbook shut.

“I’m spent,” she said casually. “Time for a break.” Then she grabbed the plastic bottle beside her, unscrewed the cap, and took a swig of juice.

“Man, with the AC busted back here, it’s crazy hot. You haven’t even broken a sweat, though, Sasa. That’s so based.”

At this, I looked over at Asami and noticed a thin layer of sweat on her brow.



She was right. The air-conditioning unit in the office, unlike the ones in the storefront, was small and obviously didn't work very well. On exceptionally hot days such as this, while better than being outside, it was hardly cool.

Now that she mentioned it, I did feel hot. However, although my brow was a little clammy to the touch, I wasn't sweating.

As I rubbed my forehead, my mouth half-open, Asami broke out in a smirk.

"Why did Sayu Ogiwara touch her forehead at that moment? Choose the correct answer from the choices below."

"Ha-ha. What are you talking about?"

Asami, who'd clearly been making fun of me, started chuckling again. I couldn't help but laugh along with her.

I casually glanced at the clock. Almost thirty minutes had passed since the start of my break. I was working a short shift, so I got only a half hour off.

"I gotta get back to work."

I closed my notebook and went over to punch my time card.

"Go get 'em."

Asami had already opened her textbook again and was looking down at it. Something about the sight of her dazzled me, and I found myself narrowing my eyes.

I had undone the top two buttons of my shirt, and I fastened them back all the way up to the top before opening the door to the office. The cold air from the storefront billowed around me, giving me goose bumps.

"That will be 648 yen, please... Oh, are you paying with e-cash? Just a moment... All right, tap it here. Thank you very much. Do you want to keep the receipt? Thanks for coming!"

The moment I stepped out of the office and into the storefront, I could hear Mr. Yaguchi conversing politely with a customer. He was speaking in a slightly higher and more nasal voice than usual. One glance at the customer confirmed that, just as I'd expected, it was a woman. A smile crept onto my face. He only ever used that tone of voice when a woman he was attracted to came into the store.

In contrast to the office, the storefront felt uncomfortably chilly to us employees, who all had to wear our short-sleeved work uniforms. Feeling

goose bumps on my skin, I began to stock the shelves in silence.

Summer was already in full swing.

I didn't get a summer vacation. However, since I wasn't going to school, as a student, I was basically on an indefinite break.

Asami had started working more morning and afternoon shifts, and that had made me aware of it.

Summer vacation, huh?

Something I'd gotten so excited about back when I was a proper high school student now felt completely unrelated to me.

Now that she was off from school, Asami started coming over almost every day. And once she arrived, she would open her textbook and work hard at her studies. This came as no surprise—she was in her third year of high school, and winter entrance exams were drawing near. The exam for the literature department of Asami's first-choice university was challenging, to put it lightly. While she studied, I would sit next to her and work through problems in the textbook Mr. Yoshida had bought me.

Entrance exams.

Those words, just like the words *summer vacation*, sounded so foreign to me.

I did study. I had nothing better to do after the housework was finished, so I used store-bought textbooks to more or less keep up with subjects a third-year student would learn. Naturally, I'd left my own schoolbooks—the kind you could get only through public institutions—back in Hokkaido. If you asked me whether I was on the same level as someone actually attending school, I'd have to say “no.” Still, I figured it was better than not studying at all.

Be that as it may...

If you then asked me whether I was going to take any entrance exams, or whether I would go to university, I wouldn't be able to answer. I had no idea how to go about taking an entrance exam independently, and I wasn't motivated enough to actually look into it.

I'd told Mr. Yoshida I'd think about my future, but the more realistically I considered it, the more unsteady I felt. What was I, someone who'd thrown away their status as a high school student, supposed to do in the future?

Going back home...to my parents' house. That was the goal I needed to consider most seriously right now. Still, even if I accomplished that, what

would I do next? I couldn't imagine anything beyond that point.

"Oh."

Before I knew it, I'd finished stocking the snacks on the shelves. I checked the clock and saw that it was just past ten AM.

I could keep up this pace and stock the shelves with kids' snacks, but I wanted to make sure all the rice balls and sandwiches, which were big sellers during lunch hours, were set out properly before noon.

I'd gotten used to my part-time job and was now able to prioritize my tasks and determine what order to do things in by myself.

As I walked to the container where the sandwiches were stacked, Mr. Yaguchi waved me over from behind the nearby cash register. "Hey, hey," he said, voice hushed. I headed his way, finding his whispering a little suspicious, since we were the only two people in the store just then.

"Do you see that expensive black car parked outside?" Mr. Yaguchi asked in a whisper, shifting only his eyes toward the exit. I followed his gaze, and just as he'd said, a pitch-black luxury car was parked, not in the lot but on the side of the road in front of the store.

"Yeah, I see it."

"It's been there every day lately. They don't come in to buy anything, but sometimes when I look out, a scary driver with sunglasses on is just sitting there, watching."

He grabbed his own shoulders as he described the driver and made exaggerated movements, pretending he was shuddering in fear.

"Well, if he's wearing sunglasses, you can't be sure he's watching, right?"

"Yeah, that's true... But it sure feels like he is."

I took another look at the car. The rear passenger windows were tinted, making it impossible to see inside. The man sitting in the driver's seat had a clean-shaven head and was wearing a pair of sunglasses. His appearance was, indeed, quite intimidating.

As I took a long, hard look at him, he moved his neck slightly. Although I couldn't tell because of his sunglasses, it felt like he was looking straight back at me. I averted my gaze, panicked.

"Could he be an undercover cop?"

"A cop?"

"I mean, you *have* been rotating women nonstop."

“Huh? You think they’re out to get *me*?” After a moment of panic, he suddenly shook his head. “Nah. Sleeping around isn’t a crime.”

“Not going to deny you sleep around, huh...?”

“Besides, cops usually drive Crowns or Legacies or some other reasonably priced car with tight handling. That’s a Mercedes out there.”

Despite what Mr. Yaguchi was saying, I didn’t know much about cars, so I couldn’t tell its make or model just by looking at it.

“Well, the road’s wide enough for people to pass him, and he’s not parked illegally. I guess we should just leave him be, but...”

At that moment, the timer for the deep fryer behind the register went off.

“It has me wondering, though,” Mr. Yaguchi murmured with emphasis as he lifted the steel basket filled with fried chicken.

I nodded vaguely, stepped out from behind the register, and went back to stacking sandwiches.

Meanwhile, I began to idly wonder why the car might be parked in the same place every day.

The most obvious potential reason was that they needed something from this convenience store. However, as far as Mr. Yaguchi knew, no one from the car had ever come in and bought anything.

In that case, there was a chance they were parking midway to another destination, and this store was just in the perfect spot. However, if that was true, wouldn’t they just park in the parking lot?

I thought I heard the sound of an engine and turned around, only to find the car gone.

“He’s left,” I said.

“Huh? ...Oh, you’re right.”

Though Mr. Yaguchi had been the one to bring up the topic of the car, it seemed like it had completely slipped his mind after we’d spoken. He looked casually out the window, then shrugged.

“I wonder if it’ll be back again tomorrow.”

“What’s the point if he’s not going to come in and buy anything?”

“For real.”

Once our conversation ended, I shifted my focus back to my work.

For some reason, time always flew by when I was talking to someone. I looked at the clock and saw that fifteen minutes had already passed.

Sandwiches, rice balls, bread... I had to get them on the shelves before lunchtime.

I started moving my hands at a nice, efficient pace, and all thoughts of the car disappeared from my mind.

Chapter 3 Transfer

Oh, that was a pretty big yawn. And now he's gulping down a can of coffee.

Mr. Yoshida's eyes never really sparkled, but on this day, they looked especially dead. He must not have been getting enough sleep.

No, wait. What could possibly keep up someone with no hobbies like Mr. Yoshida? You might even say sleeping *was* his hobby. Thinking back, it was incredibly rare to see him so exhausted in the morning.

Something must have happened to him the night before. Did that mean...?

"Mishima."

"Uh, yes?"

Somebody suddenly prodded my shoulder, making me jump. I made sure to hide my irritation at having my train of thought interrupted and turned around. Section Manager Odagiri was standing behind me.

"I asked you to do something for me earlier..."

"Oh, I've finished. I was going to email it to you once work started."

When I answered, the section manager looked confused for a moment, then nodded a couple of times.

"O-oh... Right, okay."

"Is something the matter? Do you not need it anymore?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that." The section manager scratched his head before continuing. "You just seem so much more attentive lately."

"Attentive?"

"Yeah... Before, I felt like whenever I assigned you a task, you almost never had it done when I checked back later."

"O-oh... I see."

I had to agree with his assessment. It made perfect sense—I'd been purposely doing less work and pretending I'd forgotten, after all.

"I'm pleased to see you taking your work seriously. I'll keep an eye out for that email."

"Oh, okay! I'll be sure to send it!"

The section manager grinned and returned to his seat.

Now that I thought about it, it seemed like the section manager had never completely given up on me as useless. Instead, he'd simply accepted me as "one of those people" and always came and checked up on me when he needed to.

I felt a little guilty about the way I used to act.

Work hadn't started yet, but I pulled up the internal email system, quickly attached the relevant file, and began typing up a message.

After I went out drinking with Mr. Yoshida for the first time and had a heart-to-heart with him, he stopped letting me cut corners. He'd never gone easy on me, but in the past, if he judged me incapable of doing something, he'd quickly take over to complete it; after that evening at the bar, he no longer accepted anything until I'd finished it myself.

My workload had clearly increased as a result, but it wasn't as much of a burden as I'd expected. In fact, I think it probably improved my mental health not to have to pretend I was incompetent.

I typed up a brief, polite message, then emailed the files to the section manager.

The thought of doing anything work-related before I was on the clock would have been inconceivable to my former self. This realization made me want to laugh, but I didn't let it show.

When I looked up again and shifted my gaze toward Mr. Yoshida, I could see he was looking down at something to his left.

He was messing with his phone again.

For some reason, whenever he used his phone, he would hide it under his desk. It wasn't against company policy to use your phone at work, but he must have had a guilty conscience about it anyway.

At any rate, because he held it at a lower position than his computer, it was easy to tell when Mr. Yoshida was fiddling with his phone. His gaze would stray downward despite his head stretching up above his monitor.

There could be only one reason why he had his phone out. He must be chatting with someone on a messaging app. And 80 percent of the time, that *someone* was Sayu.

Oh yeah. I still didn't have Mr. Yoshida's personal contact info. Although not being able to contact him outside of work put me at a disadvantage romantically, this was Mr. Yoshida we were talking about. If I asked him for his contact information, he would probably reply, "But you don't need to contact me for anything outside of work, do you?" without thinking anything of it. Normally, if a woman asked for a man's number without a reason, he'd try to guess why and maybe even wonder if she was romantically interested in him. It might be annoying if he got the wrong idea when the gesture wasn't romantic, but it was a pain in the ass when a guy couldn't read between the lines at all in such a situation. A *big* pain in the ass.

What was certain was that, whether the other party was aware of it or not, it was easier to grow close to someone you interacted with frequently. It was plain to see I was lagging behind both Ms. Gotou and Sayu in this respect. Especially Sayu.

The two of them were always together when he was at home, and he was even messaging her while he was at work. They were clearly close to each other. Despite not being related, they'd become like family.

It would be a stupid move for me to let Sayu monopolize that kind of relationship. I wanted to get Mr. Yoshida's contact information soon and by whatever means necessary.

"All right. Time for our morning meeting."

A commanding voice resonated through the office, interrupting my thoughts. It belonged to Ms. Gotou.

Although she normally spoke in a gentle, slow manner, she always made these announcements in a strong, clear voice.

At her signal, everyone in the office stood at attention.

We only had morning meetings at the beginning of the week, and they weren't too involved. We'd go through our monthly targets and current status, and we would be alerted of something only if it was urgent and concerned the entire organization.

I stood with my back straight, thinking it'd be over in a flash like usual, but something seemed different this time.

Someone from Human Resources who didn't usually visit our office was standing with the main speaker at the front. Beside him stood a woman I'd never seen before.

"All right. Before we start our usual announcements, I'd like to introduce a new transfer to our division," the speaker said in a relaxed tone. Then the guy from HR whispered something to the woman. He was probably instructing her to introduce herself. She gave a small nod, then took a step forward.

"My name is Ao Kanda, and I've transferred here from the Sendai branch. I haven't ever traveled to this branch before, so I'm not sure how you do things, but I'd be happy if you all could show me the ropes. It's very nice to meet everyone."

Her black hair was left in natural curls, the bridge of her nose was slim and straight, and her mouth was rather small. Even from a woman's point of view, she was freakishly pretty. And to top it off, she sounded totally comfortable speaking in front of everyone. Perhaps she'd been transferred here as a new manager? No, she was far too young for that.

"I'll be helping the section manager with his next project, so please feel free to push me around if you need to."

Her candid self-introduction received some quiet laughs from around the office.

As I'd expected, she wasn't a manager, but I could sense from the way she carried herself that she was unusually confident. Maybe she was one of those people for whom such things came naturally. Still, whatever the reason, she seemed tough.

I smiled wryly to myself—I didn't want anything to do with this woman.

"Huh?"

A high-pitched cry rose from one of the other employees. Everybody turned in the direction of the sound.

It was Mr. Yoshida.

That was when the woman named Kanda, still standing at the front, spoke up.

"Uh... Is that you, Yoshida?"

At that, a stir went through the office.

"Oh, what? Do you two know each other?" the speaker asked Ms. Kanda, smiling. She nodded.

“He was a grade below me in high school.”

“What are you doing here...?” Mr. Yoshida asked in a trembling voice, clearly shaken up.

“How convenient that you already know someone,” said the speaker. “Just ask Yoshida if you need anything.”

“Yeah. Will do.” Ms. Kanda acknowledged the speaker’s suggestion, then cast another glance toward Mr. Yoshida. As she did, she raised one of her hands up to her waist and grinned. The gesture irritated me. I looked over at Mr. Yoshida and watched him smile ambiguously and bow to her.

Something weird was going on.

It might be a surprise for an old acquaintance to transfer into your department, but I didn’t think it was something to get so shaken up over. The panicked look on Mr. Yoshida’s face gave me déjà vu.

It was just like when Ms. Gotou called him over to her desk out of the blue to talk to him...

Oh right, Ms. Gotou. She must have been involved in the HR process as well. Had she known about this woman’s connection to Mr. Yoshida?

Moving only my eyes, I glanced over at Ms. Gotou’s desk and got a shock.

She was standing there making a face I’d never seen before. I turned away, fighting back the urge to laugh.

I see. So she didn’t know, either.

To tell the truth, I’d had quite enough of this.

First, it was Ms. Gotou, who’d had ample time to build up a relationship with Mr. Yoshida, and then Sayu, who’d recently appeared out of nowhere. And then, just when I thought being sandwiched between the two of them was bad enough, his high school senior had turned up.

I had no idea what kind of connection this woman had with Mr. Yoshida, but judging from his reaction, something had obviously happened between them.

There was just one thing I wanted to say about all of this.

Please, no more rivals.

I let out a small sigh and looked back at Ms. Gotou. She’d once again plastered her usual carefree smile on her face. She always managed to recover quickly.

I silently gloated over having caught her looking uncomfortable, even if only for a moment.

Then I shifted my gaze toward Mr. Yoshida and instantly felt worse.

He looked like a high schooler whose older crush had just spoken to him. What the heck was that supposed to mean?



Chapter 4

Curly Hair

Chapter 4 Curly Hair

“Hey, Yoshida...was it good?”

We’d just finished, and Kanda, a faint smile on her face as always, asked the question as she tried to calm her ragged breathing.

“Incredible.” I nodded, earning a wry smile from Kanda.

“Liar.”

“It’s the truth.”

“If it felt that good, you would’ve come sooner, no?”

I made a sound of disagreement and shook my head.

“That’s got nothing to do with it.”

I pulled back my hips, separating myself from her. A small moan escaped her lips with the motion.

“Like I said, you didn’t need to use a condom.” Kanda cast a sidelong glance at the condom I was trying to take off. “I bet you’d come faster without one.”

“No way. What if you got pregnant?”

“I told you, I’m on the pill. It’s fine.”

She’d told me before that her periods were heavy and irregular, which irritated her, so she took the pill to regulate them. Still, I wasn’t fully convinced.

There have been cases of people getting pregnant even on the pill. I’d used my father’s work computer while he was out to look it up.

“I see. So you don’t love me.”

“It’s because I love you that I won’t do it.”

Kanda sat up, her top exposed, and scratched at her tousled hair.

“I just don’t get it. If you really loved me, you’d at least come inside me.”

From my point of view, she was the one with the strange ideas. I gave a faint smile and shook my head once more.

“When you come inside someone, it means you want to have a kid with them, right? I don’t want to think that far ahead yet.”

At that, her eyebrows jumped up, then she sighed listlessly.

“Aaand like I told you, I can’t get pregnant when I’m on the pill.”

“If we’re not going to start a family, what’s the point of coming inside you?”

Kanda groaned in irritation, then smiled awkwardly as if to cover it up.

“I just think it’d feel better for you without a condom.”

“It doesn’t matter that much how good it feels. I’m happy just doing it with you, Kanda.”

I was being totally honest.

I’d never say it, but while sex with Kanda satisfied me emotionally, if I was only thinking with my lower half, taking care of myself would have been much more satisfying. What I wanted from sex with her was the glory of having her all to myself in a private place and seeing her at her most lascivious.

Kanda offered me a smile, but I could tell from her expression that she didn’t accept my logic.

“Yoshida, are you really in love with me?”

“Yes, I love you.”

“Then do me without a condom next time, okay?”

I had no idea why she was so hung up on this. She must have read my feelings from my expression, and she laughed teasingly before continuing.

“I wanna see how fast you come without a condom on.”

“I won’t do it without a condom.”

Kanda sighed and tilted her head to the side. “Why?”

Why? *That’s my line.*

I’d already explained it to her over and over just now, so why couldn’t she understand? I decided to try putting it another way.

“It’s just, I will—someday,” I murmured. Now she tilted her head in the opposite direction.

“When’s someday?”

I didn’t have an immediate answer for her. The tip of my nose began to feel itchy, and I scratched it with my index finger.

“When...I can properly support you.”

I spoke softly, my gaze dropping to the bed. I was totally embarrassed; my face felt like it was on fire.

When Kanda didn't reply, I looked up, only to be greeted by a look I'd never seen before.

I couldn't tell if what I was seeing was surprise or fright. Kanda looked like she'd just encountered some unknown life-form. The instant our eyes met, she hurriedly put on a smile. However, it looked a little stiff.

“You're so serious, Yoshida.” She spoke in a calm, gentle rhythm, as if simply declaring how blue the sky was. “It's pretty cute, though,” she added, smirking.

“I'm...serious?”

“Yeah. I'm not saying it's a bad thing. I think it's kind of impressive. It's just...” She paused as if choosing her words, her eyes wandering around the bedsheet beneath us. “I wish you'd take things a little easier. I mean, we're dating to have fun, after all.”

“But I want to cherish my girlfriend.”

Kanda snickered at my response, then reached out a hand to tousle my hair.

“I'm glad,” she said, continuing to play with my disheveled hair. “Still...”

I looked up to meet her gaze.

The next moment, my heart jumped.

The look in her eyes was like that of a parent admonishing a child—a far cry from the way a woman might look at her boyfriend.

“That's not what I want from a relationship.”

I've never forgotten the expression on her face when she whispered those words to me.

One look and I knew it was her.

I couldn't say how many years it'd been without stopping to count, but that didn't matter.

Eyes as sharp as a fox's, a perfectly carved nose, and, in contrast to those more mature features, a cute, petite mouth above a strangely prominent mole.

And then her most striking attribute—her stark-black, curly hair.

Nothing about her had changed.

It was Kanda.

The woman I'd loved in high school—my senior.

The morning announcements went in one ear and out the other.

She remembered me, too. The moment when she'd raised her hand slightly and smiled at me played over and over in my mind.

Morning meetings had always felt short, but this one seemed to take forever. And when it finally wrapped up, I had the strangest feeling, like I'd finished a workout or something.

I'd just taken a deep breath and fallen heavily into my chair when Hashimoto poked my shoulder from the next seat over.

"What gives, Yoshida? You know that hottie?"

"Like she said, she was my senior in high school."

"Huh... *Just* your senior?"

"What're you getting at?"

A mean-spirited smile spread across Hashimoto's face.

"Well, Yoshida, you may not realize it, but you were behaving a little suspiciously there."

"Huh?"

"There's no way that's all you two were. Just now, you looked like a high schooler getting attention from his crush."

"Uh, I... That's not..." I tripped over my words. I was essentially admitting he was right, but I couldn't come up with anything better to say.

"Could she have been your first love?"

"Well, I don't know if I'd say she was my *first love*..."

Actually, thinking back, I got the feeling she *was* my first love. I couldn't recall having any romantic feelings before high school. I'd spent my time playing with friends when I was little and wasn't that aware of romance until I became a high schooler and heard more and more about my classmates' love affairs.

"Well...we did date. In high school." I knew the longer I held back, the harder it would be to talk about it and the more Hashimoto would tease me,

so I decided to come clean.

Hashimoto's eyes went wide. "...Whoa, really?"

"Why would I lie about that?"

"I mean...I thought at most it'd be a one-sided thing on your part, but I see—so you and a girl that hot..."

"That's rude, you know?"

I was a little pissed Hashimoto didn't think a hot girl would want to date me, but to tell the truth, I could hardly believe I'd dated someone like her, myself.

"Was it a bad breakup?"

"Nah, we just naturally split."

"Ah... That happens with high schoolers."

"And she graduated before me."

"Oh, so that's why."

"What're you smirking about? ...Anyway, enough about my past. What about that thing I asked you to do?"

I didn't want to endure any more teasing, and we were on the clock now, so I shifted the topic to our job.

Hashimoto frowned like he wasn't done with our previous conversation, but then he shrugged and pointed a finger to his computer monitor.

"Way ahead of you. I'm already typing up the email."

"Thanks. Throw me in the bcc just in case."

"I know, I know. I always do—you don't have to remind me. Aren't you trying a little too hard to change the topic...?"

"Shut it. I wouldn't have to if you'd stop teasing me so much."

I cut off the conversation and turned to my computer screen. But as I checked my email and opened my usual programs—morning rituals that had become muscle memory over the years—Kanda was still at the forefront of my thoughts.

Not only had she been working at another branch of the same company as me, but she'd been transferred here by pure coincidence. When I put it in words like that, it didn't seem real.

Suddenly, I felt someone watching me. I looked up, and my eyes met Mishima's. She gazed at me with a sullen expression for a few seconds before her eyes dropped back down to her own monitor. Then I felt another

pair of eyes from a different direction. Turning around, I caught a glimpse of Ms. Gotou swiftly averting her gaze.

...I must've been pretty conspicuous earlier. I really hadn't needed to raise my voice like that just because we knew each other. It was clearly unnatural, and it made sense that the coworkers who knew me best were concerned.

That being said, if I could control my actions based on whether they were necessary or not, I'd never be in trouble again. I'd met the last person I expected in the last place I expected—of course I'd cried out in surprise.

I looked over at Section Manager Odagiri and saw Kanda standing beside him, receiving some sort of explanation. He must have told a joke, because she snickered. Her shoulders drew in and shook slightly as she laughed; even that hadn't changed from when we were in high school.

It was really her. She was here.

As I idly watched her talk with the section manager, Kanda's gaze suddenly shifted. She was now looking straight into my eyes. I missed the chance to turn away, and we held each other's gazes for a few seconds before she narrowed her eyes and raised one corner of her mouth in a troubled smile. Then, moving her hand out of Section Manager Odagiri's line of sight, she pointed toward the hallway.

The gesture was clear—she wanted to talk outside. I gave a small nod and rose from my seat.

"I'm gonna go to the restroom."

"The restroom. Sure."

Hashimoto was clearly implying something. I shot him a glare, but he simply shrugged and in an exaggerated tone added, "Take your time."

I left my department's office area and waited in the hallway, where Kanda joined me after a few minutes. She found me leaning against the wall and jogged over to my side.

"Wow, what a surprise. I can't believe I ran into you again here, Yoshida."

"That's my line... So, Kanda, you became a programmer?"

"I actually wanted to be a systems engineer. I started programming for the experience, but I was good at it and ended up doing that instead. Are you a programmer, too, Yoshida?"

“Well...I’m kinda wearing both those hats right now. My main role is planning, but there are times when I’m stuck only doing one or the other.”

“Oh, that sounds pretty rough.” Kanda gave an exaggerated nod. Then she began peering into my face.

“Wh-what...?”

“Oh, nothing.” Kanda exhaled through her nose and cocked her head to one side. “You seem a little different now, Yoshida.”

“Of course I am. It’s been years... Actually, I’m surprised at how little you’ve changed.”

“Huh, really? I think I’m pretty different.”

“No, I mean it. You seem exactly the same. I knew who you were the moment I saw you.”

Kanda looked puzzled for a moment before bursting into a peal of bell-like laughter.

“I see that part of you hasn’t changed.”

“Uh, what part—?”

“Actually, there is something about me I know for sure is different; can you tell?” She smiled teasingly and dodged my question with another.

I stared intently at her face, but I didn’t see much change. My eyes automatically drifted down to the mole beneath her mouth.

“Hmm, I don’t see anything in particular...”

“Hee-hee.” Again, her eyes narrowed as one corner of her mouth turned up in a half smirk. Then, as if she was a child boasting to someone about her new treasure, she proudly thrust out her chest.

“I’m one cup size bigger now.”

“Huh?”

“These... My boobs.”

“Oh...”

My voice came out in a stupid-sounding whimper, and my eyes reflexively dropped to her chest. Even in a suit, I could tell her bust was ampler than the average woman’s. Back in high school, it’d gotten me pretty excited...

Before I could recall Kanda’s naked form, I shook my head.

“I don’t remember what size you were before.”

“Whah! So mean! You’d stare and play with them all the time!”

“Wh-wh-whoa there, do you want someone to hear?!”

“Who cares? Oh, if we’re supposed to be a secret, I won’t tell anyone.”

“Well, it’s not me I’m worried about...”

I trailed off and tilted my head to the side. It occurred to me that it was typically the woman who’d want to keep such conversations private, but maybe that wasn’t the case here.

“I just figured you wouldn’t want people knowing you dated someone like me,” I said, speaking plainly. Kanda’s eyebrows shot up in surprise; then she gave a wry smile.

“...I see that part of you hasn’t changed, either.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s get back to work. If I run into any problems, I’ll be sure to ask you for help.”

“Uh, yeah. Anytime.”

Kanda casually raised one hand before returning to the office ahead of me.

I watched as she left, slumping against the wall as all my strength left me.

“...What a day.”

A sigh escaped my lips.

I’d suddenly reunited with someone I thought I’d never see again and had a conversation with her. It didn’t sound like much when you put it in words like that, but it had totally drained me. I didn’t get this nervous even when I had to consult with clients about a project request.

“...Guess I’ll take a leak and head back.”

Though it was just an excuse, I *had* said I was going to the restroom, and I’d be stuck explaining myself if I went again right away. I trudged listlessly down the hall.

Even so...

Kanda’s words from a moment ago still rang in my thoughts.

“...I see that part of you hasn’t changed, either.”

I’d recognized her expression as she said those words.

I remembered it as one of exasperation and resignation. I’d seen her make that expression many times, countless times, while we were in high school. Whenever I saw it, I’d think I must have made some new mistake. I remembered the pain I always felt in my heart when that happened.

“I guess that part of *you* hasn’t changed, either...,” I muttered quietly to myself as I opened the door to the restroom at the end of the hall.

It seemed like none of the women I fell in love with were the type to say what they really felt.

Chapter 5 Chinese Noodles

As soon as it was an acceptable time to take my lunch break, I got up from my seat.

“I’m taking my break.”

After locking my computer screen and standing up, I made my announcement. My nearby coworkers all replied, “Enjoy,” without looking away from their monitors.

Normally...

Normally, I’d head over to Mr. Yoshida’s desk now and invite him to lunch. But not this time.

Instead, I briskly walked toward Ms. Gotou’s desk.

As I got closer, she looked up from her monitor. She saw me before I even had the chance to call out.

“Oh, Ms. Mishima?” She tilted her head in a gesture clearly saying, “What’s up?” As if she needed to ask.

She must know what I was here about, with how strange Mr. Yoshida had been acting that morning. She had to be concerned.

“Ms. Gotou... How about lunch?” I decided to keep my face serious as I made this proposal.

She glanced at her computer monitor, then quickly nodded.

“Just let me send this email real quick. Do you want to go ahead to the cafeteria?”

“Sure thing. I’ll save you a seat.”

“Thanks.” Ms. Gotou flashed a smile, then returned her gaze to her monitor. I watched out of the corner of my eye as she began typing, then set off for the cafeteria.

As soon as I arrived, I checked Mr. Yoshida's location. He had apparently left on his break while Ms. Gotou and I were talking, and he was already at a table with Mr. Hashimoto, chatting and eating.

I kept an eye on them as I stood before the meal ticket machine. Normally, I would order the grilled salmon set, but I didn't really feel like it this time. That said, I wasn't sure *what* I wanted to eat, and so I just stood there, staring blankly at the menu buttons.

People began lining up behind me, so I was unable to take my time. I'd just about made up my mind to order something quick, like udon or soba noodles, when one button happened to catch my eye.

As if drawn in by a mysterious force, my finger pressed the button. I took the dispensed ticket and handed it to the lunch lady.

"Oh, having something different today?"

"I'm not really feeling the grilled salmon."

"That happens sometimes... One bowl of Chinese noodles coming up. Here's your number."

Slightly amused at being remembered as "the grilled-salmon-set lady," I took my number ticket and headed for the tables.

I chose one a fair distance away from Mr. Yoshida's and took a seat. There was no chance he would overhear us from so far away. The moment I sat down, I spotted Ms. Gotou coming into the cafeteria. Right then, my number was called, so I hustled over to the counter, took the tray of Chinese noodles, and walked over to meet Ms. Gotou.

"I brought food with me today," she said, lifting a convenience store bag. It contained only a salad.

"I've always wondered," I said, pointing at Ms. Gotou's bag on the table as we took our seats. "Is that enough?"

Her eyes widened at my question; then she laughed.

"Hee-hee. Like senior, like junior, I guess."

"Huh?"

"Do *you* think it's enough?" Ms. Gotou cocked her head to the side. I always hated the way she would answer one question with another.

"No, I don't. That's why I'm asking."

"Hee-hee-hee, I see." Ms. Gotou rustled around in the bag and pulled out her food, then tore open the dressing packet. She drizzled it over her salad, her expression slightly sullen. "Well, I tend to eat a lot for dinner instead."

“...I see.”

That must mean it *wasn't* enough. I never understood why Ms. Gotou couldn't just say things straight-out. But there was no reason for me to pry, so I simply gave a vague response.

“So?” She tilted her head to the side again as she snapped apart her wooden chopsticks. “You had something you wanted to talk about?”

“...Well, yeah. I think you know what.”

“Hee-hee.” She gave a nasal laugh and took a bite of salad. As she chewed, she cocked her head for a third time. It seemed like she wanted me to be the one to say it.

“You know, about Mr. Yoshida. Or maybe I should say about him and... Ms. Kanda?”

As I finished speaking, she gulped down her mouthful, then nodded.

“You mean Ao Kanda. That was a surprise.”

“Did you know?”

“Know what?”

“About her acquaintance with Mr. Yoshida.”

As I asked this question, I thought back to Ms. Gotou's expression during the morning meeting and quickly realized I already knew the answer.

“Nope, I had no idea.” Just as I'd expected, she lowered her gaze and shook her head. “I didn't have much to do with Ms. Kanda's transfer in the first place. I just went over the papers after it was already settled.”

“Oh, I see.”

I realized I'd forgotten to eat while we were talking, and I slurped down some of my noodles. They weren't very firm to begin with, but they'd gotten even soggier in the meantime.

That aside, this was quite an unexpected turn of events. I was having a hard enough time trying to draw Mr. Yoshida's attention away from his crush, Ms. Gotou, when a runaway high school girl had appeared out of the blue and, right on the back of that, a woman who had gone to high school with him.

And then there was the odd way he looked at Ms. Kanda; he seemed even more infatuated than when he looked at Ms. Gotou.

“Hee-hee!” A laugh suddenly escaped Ms. Gotou's lips, and my attention was instantly pulled back to her.

“What is it?”

“You had a really grim look on your face.”

“I did?”

“You did.” Ms. Gotou’s shoulders shook as she snickered, then she looked at me, narrowing her eyes. “Are you worried she’s going to steal Yoshida’s heart?”

I could feel myself growing irritated with her, but I wasn’t sure if it was her attitude itself that annoyed me or the fact that I didn’t know the reason behind her easy demeanor.

“Aren’t you worried about it at all, Ms. Gotou?”

The words were out of my mouth before I’d really considered them. I knew I’d get nowhere asking this woman indirect questions.

Ms. Gotou seemed a little surprised at first, but she was soon tilting her head, her usual smile back on her face. She said nothing, letting the question hang as she took another bite of salad. I took another mouthful of Chinese noodles as well. They were even soggier than before.

She chewed, then let out a puff of air from her nose.

“But...,” she began, shifting her gaze away from me. “Yoshida’s reaction *was* a little odd. I’ve never seen him show so much interest in a woman before.”

As I’d thought, she had no intention of answering my question.

I let out a small sigh and nodded. “Right? That...was my first time seeing it in a while.”

“*In a while?*” Ms. Gotou keenly picked up on my use of those three words. These kinds of moments were the times she was quickest to react.

“...Just talking to myself.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes.”

I’d seen Mr. Yoshida look at Ms. Gotou like that on occasion, at least before Sayu showed up. However, I really didn’t want to say that to her face.

I ended the conversation and fixed Ms. Gotou with a stare.

“So what do we do? Just leave the two of them alone?”

“Of course... It’s not as if either of us is dating Yoshida. We have to let him do as he pleases.”

“If you act like that, Ms. Kanda might steal him away for real.”

“Ee-hee-hee.” Ms. Gotou burst into laughter. I frowned.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

Ms. Gotou fell silent for a time before locking eyes with me. “What happens, happens. Right?”

“Uh...”

I had no response for her. After all that time spent dodging my questions, she’d suddenly hit me with her honest thoughts. Her words echoed vividly in my mind, like a punch to the face.

“We can try all we like, but we can’t control another person’s feelings.”

“But that’s...”

“You can interfere, shape things to some unnatural end, and get the results you want, but...”

She poked her chopsticks into her salad and fixed her gaze on her bowl. I waited with bated breath for her to continue, as if she’d reached into my chest with her words and grabbed my very heart.

“How long will that result last, I wonder?”

“Th-that’s—” I barely managed to squeeze out my next question. “So what, it doesn’t matter what we do, no matter how hard we try?”



She closed her eyes and shook her head in response. "I didn't say it doesn't matter. But..." She kept her eyes down as she continued. "We can twist things from how they're supposed to be, but they always go back to the way they were in time."

If nothing else, I knew she was speaking from the heart. She fully believed everything she was saying.

It shook me to my core to see Ms. Gotou, whose true feelings were always so impossible to read, laying her heart bare like this.

And yet...

The next thing I felt was irritation.

"What're you talking about...?" I said before I had time to think.

Ms. Gotou looked up at me as I continued.

"All that means is you're scared."

She said nothing in reply. Little by little, I felt like I was coming to understand her.

"You're so scared you'll put in the effort only to lose what you've gained that you've decided it's best to not put in any effort at all."

When she heard that, I saw Ms. Gotou's eyebrows perk up for the first time.

I wasn't sure what I was so angry at—this woman, who loved Mr. Yoshida but didn't act on it, or myself for feeling like I was losing to her.

Either way, I was enraged, and the words wouldn't stop coming.

"I'm more scared I'll do nothing and miss out on something I could've had. What do you mean, *the way things are supposed to be*? Who decides that, huh?"

"Ms. Mishima."

"You have so many things other people wish they had, and yet you just stand there passively, waiting with that relaxed smile on your face for someone to come and choose you. How arrogant are you? Is that the *way things are supposed to be*?!"

"Ms. Mishima!" Ms. Gotou raised her voice, startling me.

The cafeteria had fallen dead silent. Without moving my head, I glanced around and saw the other employees looking this way with awkward expressions—even Mr. Yoshida and Mr. Hashimoto were staring at us blankly from their table across the room.

"...You're a little loud."

Ms. Gotou's shoulders were curled inward. She was obviously embarrassed.

I cleared my throat and lowered my head slightly.

"...I'm sorry."

Even I could tell I was blushing. I'd gotten so excited—I was acting completely unlike myself.

Ms. Gotou smiled wryly and shook her head. "There's nothing to apologize for. But I never took you for the emotional type."

"No, I'm sorry, really..."

"Hee-hee."

Ms. Gotou set down her chopsticks, then made a humming sound as she stretched. "Well, for now I guess all we can do is wait and see what happens with Ms. Kanda."

"Wait and see...?"

"Yeah, wait and see." She nodded and raised an index finger. "All we can do is wait until we know for sure what their relationship is and how Yoshida feels about her. We won't know what action to take until then, right?"

"Y-yeah, I suppose so..."

"Until then, it's enough to just wait and see, don't you think? And if things start growing suspicious, then we can get in their way."

Ms. Gotou put on a teasing smile, then took up her chopsticks again and snatched a bite of salad, stuffing it into her mouth. Watching her, I felt once again like something was off.

"You really do act like it's got nothing to do with you."

"That's because it hasn't."

"But aren't you in love with Mr. Yoshida?"

At that, Ms. Gotou's chopsticks froze, and she blinked at me. Then she continued, as if unsure what I meant. "It's because I love him that I think it's pointless to do anything."

"...Whuh?"

A breath escaped my lips, along with a foolish sound.

I had absolutely no idea what she meant; I did know, however, that she meant exactly what she'd said.

I sat dumbfounded, and Ms. Gotou pointed at the bowl before me.

"You'd better finish eating, or those noodles are going to be mush."

"Oh."

I looked down at my lunch. The noodles had grown so thick and soggy I could almost believe the bowl was as full as when I'd started, even though I knew I'd already eaten a lot.

Ms. Gotou snickered as I frantically scooped up my chopsticks.

"You're so cute, Ms. Mishima!"

At that, I furrowed my brow and shot back, "And you're so weird, Ms. Gotou."

Her eyes went wide, and she immediately began laughing out loud.

Chapter 6 Girlfriend

His chopsticks stopped moving again.

Mr. Yoshida was eating so slowly tonight.

“Hey,” I said.

“Huh?”

“I think the ginger-fried pork turned out pretty good tonight.”

“Yeah, it’s delicious.”

Mr. Yoshida nodded in agreement, then put a bite-size piece of the pork in his mouth. He followed it with a scoop of white rice and began chewing.

His eyes were unfocused as he ate, roving around a spot slightly above my head. Obviously, something else was on his mind.

Though it was none of my business, it was rare for him to be so distracted during a meal, and it made me curious.

“Mr. Yoshida.”

“Yeah?”

“Did something happen at work today?”

“Uh, what’re you talking about?”

Now Mr. Yoshida’s attention was at least focused on me.

I suppressed a giggle. His reaction alone had confirmed my suspicions.

“You’ve been out of it ever since you got home, so I thought something must’ve happened.”

“Oh... Do I look that out of it?”

“Yep, totally.”

I gave a big nod, and Mr. Yoshida scratched the back of his neck as his eyes wandered around the room.

“Well, I guess there *was* something.”

“What’re you being so vague for?”

“I just don’t think it’s that big a deal, that’s all.”

There was something strange about his demeanor.

He tended to hesitate whenever he was trying to keep something from me or when he hadn’t sorted out his feelings, but this felt different.

To put it plainly, he looked embarrassed.

“Hey, c’mon, what is it?”

A little irritated by his childish behavior, I prodded him for more information. He scratched the tip of his nose before answering.

“It’s just... Today in the office, we had a transfer from another division.”

“Yeah?”

“And that person... Well...”

Mr. Yoshida’s words faltered for a moment, and he scratched his nose once more. Then he turned his gaze down toward the table and continued.

“It was someone I used to date in high school.”

“...Whuh?”

Despite myself, a foolish sound escaped my lips.

Someone he’d dated in high school. The words rang hollow in my ears, sounding at odds with reality.

“Her name’s Kanda, and she was in the grade above me.”

“Your senior...”

So she was older than him. He really had a thing for older women, even back then. But that was hardly important now. The biggest surprise was something else entirely.

“You had a girlfriend, Mr. Yoshida...?”

The words were out of my mouth before I could think. Mr. Yoshida blinked a few times, then laughed.

“Yeah, so what? Is that so weird?”

“N-no! That’s not what I meant... But, like...I’ve never heard you talk about dating before.”

It was true. There was nothing unnatural about Mr. Yoshida having a girlfriend. In fact, I’d find it even stranger if someone as sincere as he was had never dated.

Still, despite all that...

There was some part of me that had been certain he’d never been in a relationship.

A relationship meant dating, and what came after that was...

I felt myself start to imagine Mr. Yoshida and this stranger together in vivid detail and shook my head furiously.

I remembered we were in the middle of a meal and took a quick mouthful of ginger-fried pork, but I found it didn't have much flavor.

I felt oddly restless.

"So that's what's got your head in the clouds."

"Well...I guess so. I don't know. Even just running into someone you knew in high school at work would be quite a coincidence, but for it to be my ex... It was a shock."

Mr. Yoshida spoke softly before taking a long sip of his miso soup. He was gazing toward some far-off place again; he must be remembering all about Ms. Kanda or whoever this woman was.

"D-did Miss Yuzuha say anything?"

I wanted desperately to derail his thoughts, so I threw out the first question that came to mind.

"Mishima? Why Mishima?"

"No reason. Did she say anything?"

Mr. Yoshida cocked his head to the side.

"No, nothing in particular. I didn't even speak with her today, come to think of it... Oh, wait."

He put down his chopsticks with a start. "I forgot—she argued with Ms. Gotou about something at lunch today."

"What about?"

"I'm not really sure. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but Mishima sounded really angry."

"...I see."

I had a few guesses as to why.

I figured the two of them were probably talking about Ms. Kanda. I wasn't sure why Miss Yuzuha would lash out at Ms. Gotou, but they clearly had different philosophies. It didn't sound like Miss Yuzuha was the type to get worked up about her job, so I suspected the topic of conversation had been Mr. Yoshida.

"But I don't think it had anything to do with Kanda. Mishima's not the kind of person to get all bent out of shape over a new transfer."

"...Yeah, sure." I sent Mr. Yoshida a lightly chastising look. He seemed puzzled.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

I wanted to tell him, *She's not worked up over Kanda; she's worked up over you*. But I didn't think it was my place to tell him, and for another reason entirely, I didn't really want to. That other reason, however, was difficult to put into words.

For seconds, maybe minutes, we sat in silence.

I cast a glance in Mr. Yoshida's direction, and just as I'd expected, he was still eating, his head somewhere else.

Of course, it was his right to spend his time thinking about whatever he wished. But it filled me with a deep displeasure to watch him daydream about another woman right in front of me; more than displeased, even, I felt disheartened.

“So, this Ms. Kanda...,” I began, trying to get him to focus back on me. Mr. Yoshida kept moving his chopsticks, turning only his eyes in my direction.

Unfortunately, I realized then that I hadn't actually thought of what to ask, so I just opened and closed my mouth for a few seconds. At last, a question came to me, and I voiced it right away.

“I-is she cute?”

Mr. Yoshida's brow furrowed at the question. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“Um, just curious.”

I *was* curious, though maybe asking hadn't been the best idea.

Mr. Yoshida scratched the tip of his nose. That gesture alone told me the answer before he even opened his mouth.

“Well, she's more than just cute.”

Mr. Yoshida paused there and let his gaze wander. Then, in a whisper, he said, “She's...beautiful.”

I felt a slight pain in my heart, though I wasn't sure why I was so upset.

“O-oh...”

I was the one who'd asked the question, and yet I could manage only a vague response. I took a sip of my miso soup to buy some time. The soup, too, seemed to lack flavor.

“So Ms. Gotou and now Ms. Kanda... You really do like beautiful, older women, huh?” I said jokingly, forming a teasing smile on my face. Mr.

Yoshida blushed.

“...Shut up.”

His reply brought another stinging sensation to my heart. “Wh-what’re you getting all shy about? I was just joking...”

“And why should I sit here and get teased by some brat?”

“Ah-ha-ha, you’re right. My bad!”

I cackled, though my heart wasn’t in it. Then I stood from my seat at the dinner table, suddenly unable to sit still.

Mr. Yoshida looked up at me in surprise.

“What’s going on?”

“Just heading to the restroom.”

“Okay... I’ll be here.” He nodded and looked back down at the table.

I took a few steps toward the restroom, then turned back.

“Hey,” I called out.

“Yeah?” Mr. Yoshida lifted his gaze at my voice again, this time meeting my eyes.

“I’m often...”

I stopped there. I couldn’t help looking at his expression.

I wanted to say, “I’m often called beautiful, too.” I meant to—I was going to, but I felt foolish before the words were even out of my mouth.

His expression as he looked at me was just so...normal. Like someone replying to a family member.

“Never mind. It’s nothing.”

“...Hmm?”

“I—I gotta go.”

“Okay...”

I’d grown embarrassed for some reason. Watching Mr. Yoshida—clearly puzzled by my behavior—out of the corner of my eye, I rushed into the restroom. I didn’t really have to go, so I simply sat on the toilet with the lid down.

What was it I wanted to do?

Talking with Mr. Yoshida just now, I’d become depressed all on my own. Then, as I kept talking, I’d made myself feel more and more pathetic.

“Haaah...”

I sighed.

Why was I letting myself get so riled up? I was confused by my own feelings.

Even with his ex-girlfriend in the picture, I had no doubt Mr. Yoshida would stick with Ms. Gotou, and it wasn't like she was going to affect my life with Mr. Yoshida. So why was I *this* concerned? And not just concerned, but upset?

“...I don't get it.”

I'd been thinking this ever since I ran away from home, that I had more trouble understanding myself than I did anyone else in my life.

I breathed another sigh.

Knowing it was a waste, but also knowing I couldn't leave without flushing, I pulled the toilet lever and let the empty bowl drain.

Chapter 7 Hotel

Five more minutes and work would be over.

It had been another trouble-free day. I'd already finished up everything and would be leaving right on time.

Beside me, Hashimoto had just finished preparing to go home and looked ready to jump out of his seat the moment it was time to leave.

"Amazing! We've been able to clock out on time every day this week," said Hashimoto, perhaps noticing my gaze.

"I know. There's nothing better than leaving work on time."

"I wish the Yoshida from last year could hear you say that."

"Shut up..."

Until Sayu came along, I didn't have any particular reason to hurry home. I would stay and take the initiative to help others finish whatever they had left.

"It's all thanks to Sayu," said Hashimoto. "No matter what I said, I was never able to drag you away from work."

"I said shut up. I know you're just teasing me."

"Who's Sayu?" a voice suddenly called out. Both Hashimoto and I jolted and turned to look behind us.

Standing there was Kanda. She took in the shock on both of our faces with a puzzled expression, then snickered.

"A little jumpy, aren't you?"

"Come on—you totally snuck up on us..."

"Yeah, seriously."

Hashimoto and I nodded at each other, earning another snicker from Kanda.

"What brings you over here?" I asked.

Kanda was on another project, so her seat was quite far from ours. She wouldn't come all the way over here unless she had a reason.

She nodded a few times, then raised an index finger.

"So you're leaving on time today, huh, Yoshida?"

"Yeah... Right now, in fact."

I pointed to my computer, which was already shut down, and she looked from me to my desk.

"Pretty messy desk."

"Pfft!"

Hashimoto burst out laughing, and I gave him a light kick before turning back to Kanda.

"Hey, you didn't come over here just to talk about my desk, did you?"

"Yeah, sorry, sorry. Just caught my eye." As she continued to glance at my workspace, the corners of her mouth turned up into a smile. It couldn't be *that* messy, could it?

"I was just thinking, since you're off now, and I'm almost done myself, how about we go grab a bite?"

"Uh... You mean dinner?"

My mind blanked in the face of this spontaneous invitation. Before thinking any further, I turned to Hashimoto.

"How about you?"

"Huh?" His mouth hung open in surprise, and he shook his head. "Nah, my wife cooks for me. Wait, did that invitation even include me?"

Hashimoto, half a smile on his face, cast a glance at Kanda. She returned an ambiguous grin.

"If you wanted to come, I wouldn't turn you down."

"Ha-ha, I'll pass." Hashimoto laughed, then glanced conspicuously at his watch. "Time's up. I'm out!" he announced loudly. He then gave me a small wave and left the office.

"See ya..."

I watched him take off, then fell back into my seat, exhausted.

"So how about it?" Kanda turned to me with an inquisitive look on her face.

"Hmmm..."

Though it wasn't itchy, I reached my hand back to scratch behind my neck.

My ex had just invited me out to dinner. What did that mean? That was my first concern, but soon my mind turned to Sayu. She must have started preparing dinner by now. I felt a little guilty.

“It’s been so long; don’t you wanna catch up?” Kanda insisted without a hint of consideration for my thoughts. “If you’re busy, we can do it another day.”

“Nah, I’m not really busy, but...”

“You don’t wanna eat with me?”

“It’s not like that; it’s just...” I mumbled an answer to buy some time, then let out an involuntary sigh. “All right... I’ve got nothing going on today. Let’s go. I *do* wanna catch up.”

“Yeah? All right, let’s go. I’ll grab my bag.” Kanda smirked and headed back to her seat.

I released a small breath, then took out my smartphone. I messaged Sayu saying I’d be eating out and wouldn’t need dinner, and made sure to add an apology.

“I’m off,” I called to those still working, then headed for the exit. I made brief eye contact with Mishima as I left, but she immediately looked away. It was rare for her to stay after hours.

I waited in the hallway for less than a minute before Kanda exited the office.

“All right, let’s go. Is anywhere fine?”

“Sure... Oh, well, since we’re going to be catching up, maybe someplace without any noisy students.”

“Okay, so anywhere other than a flat-rate bar should work.” Kanda giggled and took off ahead. Just like in high school, she always went at her own pace.

As I absently gazed at her face in profile, the elevator sounded its arrival.

“Yeah, yeah. The star batter from the baseball club, Murouchi. He’s got three kids now. Three! He’s my age, too. Isn’t that wild? He got married at twenty-three.”

“Married at twenty-three and three kids at twenty-seven, huh...?”

“His wife must be tough. I can hardly imagine popping out even one. She’s already had three, and so close together.”

Kanda had gotten onto the subject of our high school classmates, and maybe it was the alcohol, but she just kept going. She seemed especially concerned with marriages and kids, and I found it hard to respond at times. I’d take another swig of beer to cover up whenever I had difficulty answering, and so the drinks steadily ran out.

“Oh, another beer, please,” I called out.

“And a Yamazaki on the rocks for me.”

As the serving staff passed by, I handed them my glass with my order. I watched them leave out of the corner of my eye, then spoke up.

“Your drink, it’s a bit of a...strong choice, no?”

“Huh, really? I just like whiskey.”

Kanda gave a carefree laugh and snatched a bite of miso-flavored grilled chicken heart with her chopsticks. While she chewed on the meat, her eyes wandered around like some small forest animal. That habit, too, was the same as before.

The woman sitting across from me was so similar to how I remembered her, it was hard to believe she was real.

I stared at her in thought until she looked up, and our eyes met.

“Yeah?”

She cocked her head to the side. Something about her pose was alluring, and I instantly averted my gaze.

“Uh... So why’d you invite me out today?”

Kanda snorted and shook her head. “No reason in particular. It was just so funny to see my ex at my new job of all places, I felt like we should catch up. Don’t you agree, Yoshida?”

“...Yeah, I guess I do.” I nodded, earning a snicker from Kanda, who then cocked her head once more with a teasing expression on her face.

“So...did you hook up with anyone else after?”

“Huh?”

The question came out of nowhere, dumbfounding me. Kanda grinned and asked again.

“I mean, after we stopped seeing each other, did you fall for anyone?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“It’s no big deal; I’m just curious.”

Kanda eagerly awaited my answer. What was all this? She'd up and left me like that, and now she wanted to know what had happened after? I looked into her eyes, searching for some glimmer of intent, but she simply sat silently and waited for my reply, giving me no sign whatsoever.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Your beer and Yamazaki on the rocks."

"Oh, thanks."

The serving staff came by and set our drinks on the table. After passing Kanda her whiskey, I took a breath and continued.

"I did. Or, well, I'm still in love with them."

"Oh... Someone at work?"

"Well..."

"So it is someone from work! Ooooh, who is it?"

Kanda kept up her rapid-fire questions. With people like this, no matter how much I tried to dodge them, I'd end up spilling the beans in the end. So I exhaled and took a swig of beer.

Then I answered her directly.

"Ms. Gotou."

"...Oh, Ms. Gotou." Shooting me a meaningful smile, Kanda took a sip of her whiskey.

"Um, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing at all. Ms. Gotou is a beautiful woman."

A corner of Kanda's mouth turned up in a smile as she poked the chicken heart with her chopsticks.

"I see. You like that type, don't you, Yoshida?"

"That type?"

My question was met with another chuckle from Kanda as she took a bite of chicken heart. A pleased groan followed as she chewed. After gulping down the mouthful, she shrugged.

"How should I say this? The type who's got a timidity problem. She's beautiful, but she's always on guard."

"She's...timid?"

"Well, maybe a man would have a harder time seeing it." She snickered.

"I see, I see. Ms. Gotou, huh...?"

She said it once more a little quieter, then suddenly looked up to stare straight at me.

"So you're dating?"

“Uh, no... Not yet, but...”

“*Not yet*, huh...?” She seemed to imply something with her expression as she repeated my statement. Then she tilted her whiskey glass, which still contained more than a centimeter of liquid, upright and gulped down the remainder.

“...Phew!”

“You sure know how to hold your drink...”

“I love how much it hurts going down... *Cough!*”

“But you’re choking on it.”

Kanda held a finger to her throat, and though her face puckered, she still broke out in a pleased smile. She then took her glass of water, nearly untouched, and gulped it down before taking a deep breath.

“Haaaah... All right, Yoshida.”

“Yes?”

She lifted her head and looked straight at me. I could feel myself being drawn in by her almond-eyed stare.

“Wanna go to a hotel?”

I was stunned speechless, momentarily unsure of what to say. The very next second, I let out a breath, and a single word came with it:

“Huh?”

“Hmm? You, me, hotel, let’s go.”

“Uh, wait, why?”

“*Why?*”

Kanda’s eyes widened. She was clearly wondering why I’d even need to ask.

“Because it’s been a while since we did it, and I feel like it?”

“W-w-wait!”

I waved my hand frantically from side to side in front of me. She had a relaxed, hazy look to her as she gazed at me. She was obviously drunk.

“You must be wasted. You nearly gave me a heart attack asking that out of nowhere.”

“I mean, I’m pretty drunk, sure, but...”

Kanda offered me a loose smile as she propped her elbow up on the table, her chin resting in her open palm.

“Drunk or not, I’d still have invited you, Yoshida.”

“W-w-wait...”

“But you’re not dating anyone, right? What’s the matter?”

“I can’t just sleep with a woman I’m not in a relationship with!”

“So go out with me, then.”

At that, I felt my anger rising.

“Please knock it off.”

Chin still in her palm, she crooked her neck slightly at my words.

“Please don’t ask me out like it’s nothing,” I continued. “You don’t really have feelings for me, do you?”

“We can develop feelings for each other while we’re dating.”

“B-but...what’ll you do if you don’t end up falling in love? If we get physical in the heat of the moment and then break up later, you’ll only regret it. You should take better care of yourself.”

“Ah-ha-ha, there it is! That Yoshida logic.” Kanda burst into laughter at my explanation. But as soon as her shoulders stopped shaking, she fixed me with a chilly stare. “That part of you hasn’t changed, either.”

“...Wh-what are you talking about?”

“Right now, I’m only saying I want to have sex with you, Yoshida.” She ran an index finger down the empty glass in her hand as she spoke. “If you really care about me that much, then you should stop holding back. Just give in to your desires and fuck me already.”

“No, that’s...”

“I’m not asking you to think about my future or anything.” She smirked. “You don’t have to take any responsibility. Let’s just do it.”

“...No.”

Kanda’s seductive voice echoed in my mind.

“Even if you don’t love me, I’ve still got a nice body, right? You remember it, don’t you?”

I did remember—all the way down to her sexy voice and her unbelievably soft skin.

“That’s not the—”

“...Wuss.”

With that single word of provocation, something snapped inside me, and I could hear the blood rushing in my head.

“You better not blame me after.”

“I won’t.”

Kanda was still giving me the same challenging look.

An image of her past self, naked, surfaced in my mind. Maybe I’d drunk too much. Either way, I was turned on.

I’d started to think that as long as she was fine with it, there wasn’t a problem.

“Okay, then...”

Am I really going to do this?

Just as I was about to give in, an image of Sayu’s face came to my mind unbidden.

I was sure Sayu had made dinner, and I’d blown her off to come here. Usually, when I didn’t get to eat whatever she’d made, I would have it for breakfast the next day. But if I stayed out tonight, I wouldn’t be able to do that, either.

Of course, preparing meals was one of the conditions I had given Sayu in exchange for staying in my home, so it wasn’t as if she was preparing them only for my benefit. However, when Sayu cooked for me, it didn’t feel like she was just completing a chore—it always seemed heartfelt. I was almost certain that was the case.

It’d be awful of me to waste a meal she’d made especially for me.

My fevered thoughts steadily began to cool.

“No... On second thought, I really shouldn’t.”

Obvious disappointment clouded Kanda’s face. “...I knew you were a wuss.”

“I don’t want to stay out tonight, and I’m not interested in a one- or two-hour hookup.”

I had explained my feelings truthfully but in a way that covered up my real reason. Recently, I’d gotten good at hiding things without resorting to lying, which was probably for the best.

Kanda sighed softly, then nodded.

“Well, you have a point. If you’re not staying the night, we’d be pretty rushed.”

“Exactly. And besides...” I took a long, slow breath before continuing. “I really can’t have sex with someone I’m not even dating. And if I’m going to go out with a woman, I’d like her to be a person I can imagine marrying someday.”

Kanda stared at me as I spoke, her expression hard to describe.

“That’s why I won’t sleep with you, Kanda. Not this time and not in the future. If you really need it that badly, please find someone else.”

When I had finished, she stared at me for a few seconds, mouth agape. Then she broke into a smile.

“Ah-ha-ha, you really haven’t changed at all.” She snickered, then lowered her tone and whispered, “That’s right... You’ve always been like this.”

Suddenly, she turned away from me and seemed to gaze off into the distance. The sight of her face in profile with this expression was familiar to me, but I couldn’t recall when I’d seen it before.

“I got a little caught up in the moment there, didn’t I?” she said.

“Huh?”

“Never mind. C’mon, let’s head out.”

Kanda’s previous expression vanished into a smile as she snagged the bill.

“Today’s my treat. I asked you out, after all.”

“W-wait, I can’t let you do that.”

“Yes, you can. I want to treat you, so let me.”

“But...”

I didn’t like the idea of letting Kanda pay for our first dinner together after so long, and my resistance brought a wry smile to Kanda’s face.

“You might’ve changed a lot in some ways, Yoshida, but deep down, you’re exactly the same.”

“Wh-what’re you talking about?”

“Hmmm...” Kanda lifted her gaze to the ceiling and scratched her nose.

“I mean how you pretend to be so considerate toward others when what you’re really prioritizing are your own principles.”

She’d hesitated at first, but in the end, she made herself very clear.

“I mean, I’m not saying that’s a bad thing!” She quickly began waving a hand back and forth in front of her. “I think sticking to your principles like that is really commendable. Still...” Taking a quick breath, then exhaling through her nose, Kanda swiftly averted her gaze. “In the end, you’re just acting based on your own ideas, and yet you convince yourself it’s all for someone else’s sake. That’s a bad habit of yours, Yoshida.”

Though I wanted to respond, I couldn’t find the words.

I wanted to say, *I don't think that*, but as I thought it over, I stopped. I didn't want to have a physical relationship with Kanda right now. That much I knew for sure. But then, what had I meant when I'd said, "*You should take better care of yourself*"?

Had I subconsciously phrased it like that to convince both of us I was making the most considerate decision? As soon as that thought occurred to me, I began to feel like a real hypocrite.

"Yoshida."

The sound of someone calling my name pulled me back out of my thoughts.

Kanda was peering into my face from across the table. With a soft smile, she crooked her neck slightly and said, "I'm not blaming you."

Then, our bill in hand, she stood up from her seat. "So let me pay for you."

"...I understand. Thanks for the meal."

"Hee-hee, my pleasure."

I sat there for a few moments watching her walk away, her short heels clicking across the floor as she hustled to the front counter. Then I sighed and hurried after her.

"Oh, that's right!"

We had left the bar and were chatting idly as we made our way to the train station nearest the office. Just as we passed through the ticket gates, Kanda suddenly raised her voice as if she'd remembered something.

"What is it?"

"Well, I don't really know anyone at this branch, and I don't have anyone to contact if something comes up. So I was hoping you'd give me your contact info, if that's all right."

"Yeah, of course. No problem."

"Really? Thanks."

When I nodded, she flashed me a carefree smile and took out her smartphone. Then she opened a messaging app—the same one I used.

"Do you use this app, Yoshida?"

"Yeah, sometimes."

“Oh, you do? Didn’t expect that...”

Her reaction seemed a bit rude considering she had been the one to ask, but I ignored it and opened my app as well. Since I’d already experienced scanning another person’s QR code when I’d exchanged info with Asami, I was able to quickly open the scanning mode. This seemed to surprise Kanda even more.

“And you know how to use it, too! People *do* change, huh?”

“Oh, I’ve only just gotten the hang of it recently.”

“Oh yeah? ...Any reason why?”

“Not really. It just kind of happened.”

“*Just happened*, huh...? Pfft! What’s ‘yoshida-man’?”

“Just some random name I chose. I see yours is pretty plain...”

Before I knew it, we’d finished exchanging our info, and the name “Ao” was added to my friends list.

However, the icon to the side of her name wasn’t a picture of Kanda but a photo of a man in a dress shirt from the back. It gave me the strangest sense of déjà vu, and I tapped the icon to enlarge it. What I saw puzzled me.

“Uh...” A careless murmur escaped my lips, and Kanda cocked her head in curiosity beside me.

“Hmm, what’s up?”

“Uh... Nothing.”

I frantically closed the messaging app and shoved my smartphone in my pocket.

“Well,” I said, “as long as I’m not asleep, I should be able to reply anytime, so don’t hesitate to contact me if anything comes up.”

“Gotcha. Thanks.” She grinned and turned toward the stairs leading up to her platform, opposite mine.

“Guess we’re splitting up here.”

“Seems like it.”

“All right, let’s call it a day, then. Thanks for coming out.”

“Sure, see you at the office.”

We exchanged farewells, and I headed for the stairs leading up to my platform. Though eating with Kanda should have taken only a couple of hours, it had felt strangely longer and much more exhausting. I was sure I’d pass out the moment I got home.

With that thought in mind, I lifted my foot onto the first step when...

“Yoshida.”

“Whoa, jeez!”

I hadn’t heard her heels clacking, and yet Kanda now stood directly behind me. She’d almost caused me to trip on the stairs.

I looked at her feet, then her hands, confirming she was indeed carrying her heels.

“What the heck are you doing?”

“Heh-heh, did I scare ya?”

“Well, wouldn’t you be scared if someone silently snuck up on you?”

“If you heard me coming from the clacking of my heels, it wouldn’t be any fun, would it?”

She seemed pleased with my startled reaction and nodded to herself.

“That’s not a good reason to do it.”

I pointed to the heels in her hand as I spoke, and that teasing smile came to her face once more. She shook her head.

“You’re so dense, Yoshida. I *wanted* to surprise you. That’s why I did it.”

“Haah...”

“You should listen more closely when someone’s telling you something.”

“I *am* listening. And now that I’ve heard you, I’m asking: Was that really necessary?”

“See.” She dropped her heels to the ground and began slipping them back onto her feet as she spoke. “You *weren’t* listening. I wanted to surprise you. And I couldn’t wear my heels, otherwise you’d hear me. So I took them off. From that, it should be obvious why it was necessary... There!”

When she had finished shoving her feet back into her shoes, she stuck her tongue out at me.

“It’s because you’ve always got your Yoshida Filter on!”

“My *Yoshida Filter*...?”

“Well, in the end, you are who you are. You’ll never be able to remove it completely and hear what people are actually saying.”



Kanda gave me a sharp pat on my shoulder. She put her full strength into it, and yet it didn't hurt at all.

"After all, your filter's so thick and misshapen!"

"What does that even mean?"

"Just what I said. I think you'd be better off if you thinned it out a little. See ya!"

"Uh, oh... See you."

Having spoken her mind, Kanda waved and walked off. This time, I watched her as she began to make her way up the stairs to her platform. She didn't appear to be coming back to scare me again.

"Haaaah..."

I let out a long sigh.

My Yoshida Filter, huh...?

I thought back on what she'd said to me.

I think humans more or less form their value systems based on the thoughts and experiences accumulated over their lifetimes. Maybe she was trying to tell me that, because of those biases, you're sometimes not able to hear what other people are truly saying.

It was possible, of course, that there was also something wrong with the way I listened to people. But at the same time, I had a hard time taking her words as anything other than a joke.

I never imagined someone would go to the trouble of taking off her shoes outside and sneaking up on me just to surprise me.

"Yoshida."

"Whoa, jeez!"

"Did I scare ya?"

"Knock it off already!"

And I certainly never imagined someone would do it twice.

I turned back, nearly tripping over myself on the stairs, to see Kanda with her shoes off again, doubled over laughing.

Chapter 8 Chance Meeting

“Haaah...”

“You’ve been sighing a lot today; did something happen?”

Asami, who had been standing idly to my side, suddenly decided to speak, causing me to jolt in surprise.

“Huh?”

“Don’t *huh* me. That last one was the loudest yet.”

“No way—I didn’t sigh.”

“Yeah, you did. You tellin’ me you didn’t notice?”

She flipped her hair back off her shoulder in annoyance, then tilted her head to the side and asked me again:

“Did something happen?”

“No... Nothing in particular, just...”

I thought back on the previous day’s events.

Mr. Yoshida had gone out to eat last night and had come home fairly late.

Because he hadn’t said who he was going out with in his initial message, I’d casually asked him once he was home. It turned out it was his high school ex.

Once home, he properly apologized for missing dinner, then went straight to the bathroom to take a shower—a rare change to his nightly ritual. After showering, he went to bed and lay there, looking lost in thought for almost half an hour before passing out.

Suddenly deciding to eat out, coming home late, acting weird...

Each of these things on its own wasn’t uncommon, but all of them happening on the same night had me overthinking the situation.

I started wondering if they’d really only had dinner—and if not, what else they’d done. I pored over these thoughts, anguished.

“I mean, well, it’s not really my place to butt in on Mr. Yoshida’s business, though.”

I explained to Asami what had happened the day before, including how upset it had made me. As I talked, not a single customer came into the convenience store. Our location wasn’t particularly busy, but on this day, it was especially slow.

Noticing that Asami—usually quite chatty—had fallen silent, I glanced her way and saw that she was staring blankly at me with her mouth hanging open.

“Uh, what’s up?”

“Sasa, that’s...” Asami frowned and seemed to be struggling with her next words. I cocked my head to the side.

Just then, the office door opened, and out popped Mr. Yaguchi’s face.

“My break’s over,” he said listlessly as he emerged from the back—he’d clearly just woken up from a nap.

“Still seems pretty dead today. You should go take your break now, Asami.”

“Yup. I’ll go ahead.” Asami nodded and gave me a small wave before slipping off into the office.

I was still curious what she’d been about to say, but it could wait.

“I’m surprised I napped so well.” Mr. Yaguchi grunted beside me as he stretched.

“You looked pretty tired before your break.”

“I get sleepy when it’s humid.”

“Huh. Why’s that?”

“I’m not sure, but it’s always been this way. I’m all rested now, though, so I should survive the rest of my shift.”

He placed a hand on his hip and nodded to himself, then turned to look at me.

“Is there anything left to do today?”

“Nope... We’re more or less done.”

“Makes sense... You two are pretty serious, so I can’t imagine you’d just sit around and chat behind the register when there’s work to do.” Mr. Yaguchi shot me a wry smile before glancing out the window. Then he tapped me on the shoulder. “It’s here again.”

“Huh?”

“Look, the Mercedes.”

I looked outside the store and saw the luxury car from before parking in its usual spot.

“You’re right. I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen it arrive.”

“Yeah... Oh?”

Mr. Yaguchi raised his voice—the reason was obvious.

The car usually just sat there, parked. But now, its rear door had opened.

“Think they’ll actually come buy something today?”

As Mr. Yaguchi spoke, a faint smile on his face, I kept my eyes glued to the back seat of the car. I wondered just what kind of person would come out.

It was a man, tall and sleek, dressed in a suit, who slowly exited the vehicle. He wore a white dress shirt and a blue necktie. His black hair had a slightly brown tinge to it...

The moment my eyes locked on to his face, I felt all the blood in my body run cold.

When I saw the car door shut and the man take his first step toward the store, I ducked and hid behind the register without so much as a thought.

“Uh, what’s up?”

Mr. Yaguchi looked down at me in puzzlement. Unable to speak, I simply curled up and trembled. He looked between me and the approaching man a number of times before tilting his head.

“Is he...someone you know?”

I gave an emphatic nod.

“Someone you don’t wanna see?”

Another emphatic nod.

At that, Mr. Yaguchi shuffled over to the office door, maintaining a natural demeanor as he opened it. Then he spoke in a low voice.

“Stay down and sneak in here.”

I looked at his face in surprise, and he whispered, “Hurry,” not looking at me. It dawned on me that he was avoiding eye contact to keep my presence a secret from the man outside, and I hurriedly crawled into the office.

Mr. Yaguchi grinned and shut the door. Asami, seated inside, stared at me in amazement.

“Uh, what’s up?”

“J-just, you know...”

Having made it to safety, I was finally able to speak again. But my heart was still pounding in my chest, and my breathing had become a bit shallow.

Why?

I recalled the face of the man who'd emerged from the car and broke out in a cold sweat.

What's my older brother doing here?

“Welcome!”

I gave the perfunctory convenience store greeting as the man in the suit made his way in.

Hoping he'd just come here to buy something, I followed his movements out of the corner of my eye. Instead of looking around, he made his way directly to where I was standing at the register.

“Welcome.”

I pasted on a smile as I spoke to him. He, too, faked a smile as he replied.

“Sorry to bother you. I'm Issa Ogiwara. Here's my card.”

He took out a business-card case from his inner breast pocket, then handed one of the cards to me. It was now clear he wasn't here simply to buy some snacks.

“Uh-huh.”

I gave an ambiguous nod and casually took the business card with one hand. I was just a convenience store clerk right now. No way was I going to use proper “business manners.”

ISSA OGIWARA, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF OGIWARA FOODS CORPORATION

This information was presented in a simple, easy-to-read font.

I maintained a neutral expression, but he had me a little shaken. Ogiwara Foods was a well-known brand. Anyone off the street would recognize them as “that one frozen-food distributor.” And now, the head of the company had made his way out to our remote little convenience store and was handing me his business card. Just what was going on?

And yet, I felt I already knew the answer. Sayu hiding in the office was certainly a big hint.

“I have a question I'd like to ask you,” said President Ogiwara, that businessman smile still spread across his face.

“I’m looking for a girl named Sayu Ogiwara. Does she work here?”

There it is. I sighed internally.

I’d thought it was strange a girl had been missing for months and no one had filed a missing person report. So they *had* been looking for her.

Regardless, it had nothing to do with me. And besides, I didn’t like this guy’s vibes.

“I’ve never heard that name before. Maybe you’ve got the wrong convenience store?”

President Ogiwara’s eyebrows jumped at my suggestion.

“My investigation showed she was employed here.”

“I think your investigation made a mistake, then.”

“Where’s your manager?”

I’d expected that. In a stroke of luck, the manager was off duty today. The man’s mention of an *investigation* intimidated me, but if he’d been thorough, he would’ve come on a day when the manager was here. He didn’t seem too familiar with this sort of game.

“He’s off duty today. If you have a message for him, I’d be glad to pass it along...”

I spoke without changing my expression, and after a few moments of staring at me like he had something to say, he let out a forced sigh.

“Is that right? Okay then, please tell him I’ll come back another day.”

“Come as often as you like, but you won’t find that girl here.”

“I’ll check with the manager to make sure that’s the case, thank you. Until then.”

Beneath his smile, the president’s expression oozed displeasure. He gave a small bow before briskly making his way out of the store.

“...Not even gonna buy anything, huh,” I muttered to myself as I watched him leave.

The luxury car took off the moment the man got in. So the reason he’d been parked out there so often and for so long was to make sure Sayu was actually working here. I found it hard to imagine the president had been here every time, though. He probably sent a secretary or someone to watch us while he was at work.

It was a surprise, however, to learn Sayu was related to the president of Ogiwara Foods. He seemed a little young, but perhaps he was her father? If so, maybe she had a complicated family situation.

With that thought in mind, I recalled his expression.

Though he spoke humbly and politely, he seemed assured of his success. That confident expression was what I hated most about him.

The more someone succeeded at everything, the more I wanted to make sure they screwed up. Deep down, I had a rotten personality, and I was practically allergic to “winners” like him.

“Oh yeah...”

I suddenly remembered Sayu was still hiding in the office. I walked over to the entrance of the store and stepped out through the automatic doors. After looking around to make sure the Mercedes was out of sight, I headed back inside.

I opened the office door and peeked in to find Sayu sitting on the floor in the corner of the office. She looked scared out of her wits.

“It’s safe. You can come out now.”

“H-he’s gone?”

“Yeah.”

“O-okay...”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sayu heave a big sigh of relief as I headed back to the storefront.

Still, this is turning into one hell of a thing, I thought to myself.

If she’d already been tracked down and they knew her location, it was only a matter of time before they caught her.

What’s more, the guy letting her live with him...whatever his name was—the super-serious guy. He might not get out of it unscathed, either.

I wonder how all this is going to end, I thought.

Then I quickly reminded myself that it was, ultimately, none of my business.

“Your bro?”

“Yeah, my older brother.”

Inside the office, Asami and I spoke in hushed voices.

“What, you mean your bro’s here now?”

“Yeah...”

“I-is he here looking for you, y’think?”

"I...think so." I nodded. Asami curled her hair around a finger and hummed to herself in thought.

"If your family's looking for you...it seems like maybe it's best for you to go home." She paused there and glanced my way. "...But you still don't feel like going back, do you?"

"...Yeah, not yet... I feel like, I dunno, I'm not ready or something."

"Gotcha." Asami nodded and fell silent. She then took my hand in a firm grasp. Her fingers felt so warm.

Now that we weren't talking, I could hear Mr. Yaguchi's voice, as well as my brother's, permeating the wall to my side. I couldn't tell what they were saying, though.

So my brother had come looking for me after all. I *knew* he would.

It probably hadn't been a great idea to throw away my cell phone. He'd already been worried about me, and not being able to contact me at all was only going to make it worse.

Be that as it may, I wouldn't have had the heart back then to resist my brother's messages telling me to come home. I didn't bear any grudges against him; however, the last thing I wanted was to go back.

The office door opened with a click, and Mr. Yaguchi's face appeared in the opening.

"It's safe. You can come out now."

When Mr. Yaguchi smiled and said those words, I felt strangely relieved.

"H-he's gone?"

"Yeah."

"O-okay..."

Once I had confirmed my brother was gone, I felt so relieved I thought I would collapse. I breathed a sigh despite myself.

Mr. Yaguchi took in my demeanor with an unreadable expression, then turned back to the storefront without a word.

"Oh, I've gotta get back out there, too," I said. "I guess this is kind of like slacking off. Sorry."

Asami burst out laughing. "What're you apologizing to me for? 'Sides, it's dead today. Nothing to do out there but chat."

"Y-yeah, but still..."

"It's fine. Go, go. I'm gonna cram till time's up. Don't distract me, 'kay?"

She pointed to her open textbook as she spoke. I felt a little bad for interrupting her.

“Sorry to bother you.”

“S’all good, s’all good!”

“...Thanks for being with me.”

Asami didn’t say anything, instead offering me a toothy grin.

I left the office for the storefront. Though I knew my brother had gone, I couldn’t help but look around just to make sure.

“So...he’s family, yeah? Your dad?” Mr. Yaguchi asked casually from in front of the register. Thinking it wasn’t right to hide the truth from him after he’d saved me, I answered honestly.

“No...my older brother.”

“I see, I see. Your older brother, huh? I thought he looked too young to be a father.” He nodded a few times in acknowledgment before putting on a joking expression. “He was pretty good-looking. Guess it runs in the family. Are your parents supermodels?”

He was clearly teasing me. I looked away, embarrassed.

“Please don’t make fun of me,” I said before realizing I’d left out something important. “Um... Thanks for saving me back there.”

He raised his eyebrows and put on a show of surprise.

“Well, I wasn’t really trying to save you or anything.”

“But you hid me in the back.”

“Well, sure, that was the result.” A wry smile crept over Mr. Yaguchi’s face. “I just don’t like those kinda guys very much.”

“What kind...do you mean?”

He hummed in thought for a moment before continuing.

“The kind with power, who think they can do whatever they want with people.” He flashed a disarming smile. “I’m more the laissez-faire type. I think everyone should live their lives doing whatever makes them happy. That’s why if someone comes in here, saying they wanna drag you home when you’re not ready to go back, I won’t help them.”

Mr. Yaguchi spoke with a rare directness. Then his face took on a slightly darker expression.

“But that doesn’t mean I can help you. Best I can do is play dumb.” He gave me a sidelong glance that lacked his usual warmth. “He’s serious about this. Adults are scary when they get serious.”

“...That’s true.”

“It’s just a matter of how much longer you can keep running.” He fell silent for a moment, then flashed me a goofy smile. “Oh well, it’s not really my business.”

He slipped by me and patted me on the shoulder. Then he headed for the beverage storage room. I watched him go as my thoughts continued to swirl.

It’s just a matter of how much longer I can keep running. As Mr. Yaguchi had said, now that my brother was here, I didn’t have much time left.

My time on the run, which I’d been dragging out for far too long, was finally coming to an end. Mr. Yoshida must have thought, as I did, that *I* would get to choose when to go back home. However, reality is never that simple.

In the end, I’d been making light of the situation.

Still, criticizing myself didn’t make it any easier to sort out my feelings. I wasn’t ready for the end to come so much sooner than I’d expected.

The breeze from the air conditioner cooled my skin, and I felt goose bumps forming.

For some reason, the air felt much colder than it should.

Chapter 9 Contact Info

“You’re glued to your phone lately, Mr. Yoshida,” Mishima said, poking at her usual order of salmon with her chopsticks.

This again? I almost let out a sigh but held it in. The memory of Ms. Gotou grilling me over the same thing was still fresh in my mind.

“Ms. Gotou said that, too,” I replied, frowning slightly. Mishima pouted, clearly perturbed.

“That means you’ve been doing it so much that even your boss has noticed.”

“Well, it’s not like it’s against the rules or anything. I never hid it in the first place.”

“Hmph. I guess.”

Mishima let out a puff of air through her nose, then took a big mouthful of white rice and salmon. Once she’d chewed it and swallowed it down, she continued. I noticed she spoke with her mouth full a lot less often lately. I wondered if she was making a conscious effort.

“Are you talking to Sayu?” she asked.

“Yeah. Well, mostly.”

“Mostly?”

“Yeah, mostly. I have a few other contacts as well, but she’s the one who messages me most.”

“I see, I see...”

Mishima narrowed her eyes and extended her hand to me, her palm facing upward like she was asking for something.

“What?”

“Show me, please.”

“Huh?”

“Your contact list. I’m curious who all you’re messaging.”

“Um... Why would you need to know that?”

Despite what I’d said, I didn’t think I had anything to hide from her, so I took my smartphone out of my pocket. I figured it’d be better to get it over with than drag out this conversation any longer.

I opened the messaging app, navigated to the “Friends” screen, and handed the phone to Mishima. She took it from me, then looked shocked.

“It’s practically empty!”

“I told you so.”

“Still, I didn’t think it’d be *this* empty. Don’t you even have any old school friends on here...?”

“Those friends just email me. They’re not the kind of people who chat on messaging apps.”

“I see... Ms. Gotou, Sayu, and... Hmm?”

Mishima suddenly frowned.

“Who’s this ‘Ao’...?”

“Oh, that’s Kanda.”

“...Hmm.” Mishima glared at me. “You move pretty quickly, huh?!” she said contemptuously.

“What are you talking about?!”

“You’ve never asked for *my* contact info...”

“I mean, I don’t really need it.”

“But you needed Ms. Kanda’s?! She’s in a different division! What would you need hers for?!”

“Lay off. It’s not like I asked her for it! What are you getting so worked up over?!”

Mishima was loudly berating me, so I ended up shouting as well. If Hashimoto had been there, he would definitely have laughed at me.

He’d been invited by one of the managers to lunch—a rare occurrence—so Mishima and I were eating without him.

“I feel bad you have so few friends, so I’ll go ahead and add in my info.”

“I told you—I don’t need it.”

“What do you mean, you *don’t need it*?! Don’t you think that’s kind of rude?!”

“I’m pretty sure it’s worse to tell someone you feel bad they don’t have enough friends!”

Mishima puffed out her cheeks as she tapped on my smartphone screen. A few moments later, she showed it to me. The name “Yu” had been added to my “Friends” list.

“Why ‘Yu’?”

“It’s short for ‘Yuzuha.’ More importantly, why is your name ‘yoshida-man’?”

“Why’s everyone always gotta point that out?”

I’d never dreamed my randomly chosen username, “yoshida-man,” would end up being the target of so much ridicule.

“Okay. Here you go.”

Mishima handed my phone back to me and picked up her chopsticks again. I put the phone into my pocket, then took a slurp of my Chinese noodles. These noodles tended to get soggy unusually fast, and they were already like mush. That said, I didn’t really mind the mushiness.

“Uhhh... Mr. Yoshida.” Mishima’s voice was quiet. Her eyes were fixed on the tabletop, and in stark contrast to how she’d been acting just moments earlier, she looked totally deflated.

“...What is it?” Surprised by her sudden change in mood, I stopped eating and looked at her.

“I... I feel like we’ve been working together for a pretty long time now.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“We eat lunch together regularly, and we went to see a movie together.”

“We did.” My bland response earned a momentary glare from Mishima, but she just as quickly looked back down at the table.

“...I thought we were pretty close. So when you told me you didn’t need my contact information...that kinda hurt.”

I was at a loss for words and could only flap my mouth silently for a few moments.

“Couldn’t you try to see me as a little more than just your coworker?”

“I...”

“Am I really that insignificant to you—?”

“Hold up there.” I cut Mishima off mid-sentence, waving a hand back and forth between us. “What’s going on with you? I never said anything like that.”

“If I really do matter to you, then why can’t we swap contact info, even if it’s not important? I don’t think things like this have to be necessary. You

just have to want to.”

“That’s not what I meant at all...”

It seemed we had our wires crossed. I wasn’t refusing to exchange contact information with Mishima because I thought she was boring.

“Well...you see...” I wanted to tell her how I felt, but I had a hard time putting it into words. “It’s not really about how I feel about you. Mishima... I’ve always thought we got along better than average, just like with Hashimoto and Endou. It’s just...”

It wasn’t that I didn’t find her interesting. Quite the opposite, in fact.

“Now that we’ve exchanged info without actually needing to contact each other, I’m not sure what on earth we’re meant to talk about.”

“Huh?”

Mishima blinked in surprise. Undeterred, I continued my explanation; if I stopped there, I got the feeling I’d lose sight of what I was getting at and never find it again.

“I’m a pretty boring guy with no hobbies, and even though we’ve exchanged contact info, I don’t have anything fun to discuss with you. It’d be different if I had more things to talk about... But I don’t send people messages unless I have to, and even when people message me, I never have anything interesting to say back.”

I tried desperately to express my thoughts. Putting them into words gave me the opportunity to view them objectively and make sense of how I felt.

As I spoke, however, the scowl on Mishima’s face was getting more and more intense. The instant I finished speaking, she responded like she couldn’t wait another second.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa... Huh? ...Wh-what are you talking about? You’re not making any sense.” Mishima’s voice was shaky, and she was scratching her head in bewilderment.

“So what you’re trying to say is...” She narrowed her eyes and glared at me. “...You’re not interesting enough to trade info with me unless you have a specific reason?”

“W-well... To put it simply, yeah.”

“Huhhh...?! Give me a break.” Mishima sighed heavily, then added another short, venomous remark. “You’re acting like an idiot.”

“Huh?”

“No, you’re not just acting like one. You *are* an idiot, Mr. Yoshida.”

“Wait, what? Why are you getting so aggressive?”

Her sudden verbal attack left me confused, but my attitude must have angered her even more, because now she was raising her voice at me.

“You’re more than just an idiot. You’re arrogant, too! Every choice you make is based on your own set of values, Mr. Yoshida. Sometimes, I think that’s one of your good points, but right now, it’s the absolute worst.”

Mishima was talking faster and faster, but her words cut me to the core. It was the same thing Kanda had said just the day before.

“That might work for you, but what about my feelings?”

“What are your feelings, then?”

“Like I said...!”

Mishima’s eyes went wide. She was clearly enraged. But then she took a deep breath, and her shoulders drooped like she’d come back to her senses. She exhaled slowly. It looked like she’d been about to yell at me but stopped herself.

“...I want us to swap contact info.”

“Well, I mean...you kinda did that by force already.”

“Who would snatch someone’s phone to exchange contact information if they didn’t really want to?”

“...No one, probably.”

“No one.”

Mishima released a puff of air through her nose, then lowered her voice and continued.

“I don’t ask just anyone for their contact info, you know. In fact, you’re the only person at work I’ve asked.”

She glanced at me, then turned away just as quickly. For some reason, her cheeks seemed redder than usual.

“I asked you because I like you, Mr. Yoshida.”

After a couple seconds of tense silence, she made a little addition.

“...Relatively, I mean.”

“Relatively, huh?”

When I repeated her words, she puffed her cheeks out in displeasure but soon sighed.

“Haah... Anyway, as I said, I wanted to exchange contact info so badly I did it by force. Is that enough for you?”

“Well...when you put it that way, I guess so.”

I nodded, earning another sigh from Mishima, who then picked up her chopsticks as if she'd just remembered they were there. Seeing that reminded me about my own half-finished meal, and I looked at the bowl sitting in front of me. The noodles had obviously gone completely soggy. I frantically picked up my chopsticks and slurped up a mouthful. They were now the soggiest noodles I'd ever tasted. You could hardly even consider them noodles anymore, and they weren't very good.

We continued to eat in silence for a few minutes. Then, once Mishima finished her salmon, she whispered something to me.

"...If you don't mind, I'll invite you to a movie again sometime."

Then she sipped her clam miso soup to hide her obvious embarrassment.

"Sure," I answered, then finished the rest of my noodles.

My own thoughts and the things other people wanted...

I could only ever perceive things from my point of view. And yet, my conversations with Kanda and Mishima had taught me that I'd probably been considering my own perspective far too much.

In the past, I'd always told myself that I was bad at talking to women because I couldn't keep up with their conversations, but perhaps they found me just as difficult to talk to.

This seemed like a problem with no easy solution.

I knew the world didn't revolve around me, but no matter how hard I tried to see things differently, the place *I* was standing was the center of my world.

My phone suddenly began to vibrate in my pocket. I hurriedly pulled it out to find I'd received a message from "Yu."

Your noodles are soggy. They look super gross.

I frowned as I read the message. *That's your fault*, I thought, but caught myself before I said it out loud.

Mishima had gone out of her way to send me a message she could just as easily have said to me out loud. I felt it only appropriate to respond in the same way.

These are the worst Chinese noodles I've ever had.

My reply earned a snicker from Mishima. Then she looked up from her phone to my face.

"You're so blunt, Mr. Yoshida. You're like a little kid." She giggled. "I like that about you."

Seeing her expression made me smile, too.

How was I supposed to interpret that? I gave it a little thought, but when I stole a glance at her expression, she just looked like she was cracking a joke, so I wasn't able to tell.

Chapter 10 Summer Festival

With Kanda's transfer to our department and Mishima's strange outburst in the cafeteria, it had been an emotionally exhausting week—but now, it was finally over.

I started the weekend by spending so much time in bed, even *I* could tell I was oversleeping. Sayu woke me up every day during the week, but she didn't on weekends, no matter how much I slept.

I took advantage of this and went back to sleep two or three times until I worked up the energy to get up naturally. Before I knew it, it was already past three PM. I'd gone to bed just after midnight the night before, which, according to my simple calculations, meant I'd gotten around fifteen hours of sleep. As expected, I wasn't tired in the slightest after that much rest, so all it took was a shake of the head and I was wide awake.

Lifting my head and looking to the side, I saw Sayu lying on the carpet, curled up into a ball like a roly-poly.

“...Good morning, Sayu.”

“Morning,” she replied without looking at me. She sounded unusually drained and seemed distracted.

“What time did you wake up?”

“Hmm?”

“Did you only just wake up?”

“Hrrrm...”

After asking her a few questions, I realized how strange she was acting. She was clearly not paying attention. I drew in a short breath, then called out her name, a little louder this time.

“Sayu!”

“Hwah!”

This seemed to startle her. She turned to face me, looking surprised.

“...Good morning,” I said again.

“G-good morning.”

“Were you sleeping?”

“N-no, I was awake. Sorry, I was just kinda spaced out...,” she replied. I smiled wryly. It was obvious she was more than *just kinda spaced out*.

“Is something on your mind?” I asked as I got out of bed. Sayu slowly got up as well, though the look on her face was difficult to describe. Then, a few moments later, she gave me a goofy, relaxed smile.

“Nah, not really,” she said.

“...You sure?”

The way she was acting seemed a little off, but I didn’t think there was any point in pressing the issue after she’d insisted there was nothing on her mind, so I decided to drop it.

I thought about bringing up a new topic of conversation instead but couldn’t think of anything, so I just sat cross-legged on my bed, leaning against the wall. Sayu had also sat up and was now staring at the floor, spacing out again. Maybe because she’d been lying down, her hair was matted against one of her cheeks, and I ended up staring at it. It would be easy to brush aside with my finger. As much as I wanted to, my body still felt sluggish from sleeping, and I couldn’t muster the energy to stand.

Suddenly, Sayu looked up, and our eyes met. We stared at each other for a few seconds. She still had a vacant expression on her face, and even though we were looking into each other’s eyes, it seemed like her mind was somewhere else.

“When I think about going home to Hokkaido...”

Sayu began speaking out of the blue, startling me. For a moment, I wasn’t sure whether it was really me she was talking to, but since I was the only other person in the room, I figured it had to be.

“I know I don’t want to, but...” Sayu paused there and offered me a self-deprecating smile. Then she looked back down.

“Do I not want to go just because I don’t feel like it? Or...” She let her words fall to the floor, one by one. Then she looked up at me.

“Or is it because I don’t want to leave you, Mr. Yoshida...?” Her words sounded weak, and she looked down again as she spoke. “I don’t know anymore.”

After that, she fell silent again. My mouth hung half-open—I wasn't sure how to reply.

Back at the start of summer, Sayu had told me she would think about her future. This had been a clear declaration on her part that she would begin preparing to go back to where she belonged, and at the same time, it'd been an important promise between us.

After all the effort she'd put in to achieve that goal, it surprised me to hear her weakly admitting she didn't want to go home.

I had no intention whatsoever of criticizing her, though. If her family home was bad enough to make her want to run away in the first place, it was only natural she didn't look forward to going back. I was just surprised she'd voiced those thoughts.

For as long as I had known her, I'd had the impression Sayu was the type who paid too much attention to other people's feelings. She'd promised me she'd go back, but now she was saying she didn't want to. The Sayu I knew would probably have been worried I'd think she was taking advantage of me or not fulfilling her promise. So what did it mean that she'd told me this anyway?

The other thing she'd said, about not wanting to leave me, also weighed on my mind.

It was true that Sayu and I had fostered a relationship of trust over the extended time we'd spent together—but had I become so important to her she would say out loud that she didn't want to leave me?

“That's...”

I shook my head. The words I'd heard from Kanda and Mishima all week came rushing back.

“That's something...only you know.”

I knew this response wasn't helpful and wasn't at all what she was looking for, but I said it anyway. It was the only response I could come up with.

Sayu blinked a few times, dumbfounded. Then, unable to hold it in, she snickered.

“You're right. Sorry, I shouldn't have said anything.” She offered me a weak smile.

“Nah, it's fine... You wanted to say it, didn't you?”

Sayu smiled apologetically and gave a small nod.

“...Yeah. I was thinking about it the whole time you were asleep.”

“That...must’ve sucked.”

“...Yeah.”

For a second, I thought her voice sounded more nasal than it had before, but she quickly snorted and looked up. Then she stood and made her way toward the kitchen. As I watched her, she filled a cup with water and headed back over.

“Here.”

“Huh?”

“Water. If you drink a cup after you wake up, your stomach will start working, and you’ll feel refreshed.”

“Huh? For real?”

“I saw it online.”

“Sounds like BS... Thanks anyway, though.”

I took the cup and drank from it. My throat was sticky from sleeping, and it felt like the water was being absorbed straight into my body. After taking that first gulp, I emptied the rest of the cup in one go.

“Wow, you really knocked that back.”

“Shut up.”

I got out of bed and went to put the empty cup in the sink. The moment I put it down, I thought I heard a low rumbling, like a distant explosion. I turned around to look at Sayu.

“Did you hear that?”

“Huh?” She cocked her head in confusion. “I didn’t hear anything.”

Judging from her reaction, she really hadn’t.

“...Guess I imagined it.”

But as soon as I finished my sentence, I heard the rumbling again; it was coming from outside.

“Oh!” cried Sayu.

“I knew I heard something.”

Apparently, Sayu had heard it, too, because she nodded vigorously.

We stayed still for a few seconds, not saying a thing. We could hear the rumbling sound at regular intervals. Sayu tilted her head to one side.

“...Fireworks?” she wondered aloud.

“Can’t be. No one launches fireworks at this time of day.”

It was still three PM. The sun had only just begun its slow descent, and it was by no means dark enough to enjoy the full beauty of fireworks.

“Oh!”

I had a sudden realization and rushed back to my bed. There, I grabbed the laptop I’d left to the side of my sleeping area and switched it on.

“What’s up?” Sayu peered curiously at my computer screen from the side.

“I just realized what it might be.”

Opening my browser, I typed the name of the nearest train station into the search bar, followed by the word *festival*.

Immediately, my suspicions were confirmed.

Among the search results was information about a summer festival stretching from the large shrine about a ten minutes’ walk from my apartment to the shopping arcade in the same neighborhood.

“It says it’s today. The weather’s good, so they must be firing blanks to announce they’ll be holding the festival.”

“Oh, I see.” Sayu nodded. She narrowed her eyes slightly, staring into the distance. “The summer festival, huh...,” she muttered to herself.

Her voice was full of nostalgia, but at the same time, it sounded like she was talking about something completely removed from her own life.

“Wanna go?” I asked casually, before thinking anything through.

“Huh?” Sayu yelped like I was crazy, turning to me in surprise.

“The summer festival. Wanna go?” I asked again, but Sayu just blinked repeatedly and looked away.

“Uhhh, I guess... The summer festival... Sure.” She looked around the floor aimlessly, fidgeting. “This might surprise you, but...”

“Yeah?”

“I haven’t been to a summer festival since I started high school.”

“Huh...? Really?”

It *did* surprise me to hear that. I always thought of summer festivals as places where middle schoolers and high schoolers hung out with friends or went on dates.

“Yeah. I didn’t have any friends to go with, and I never considered going on my own.”

“...I see.”

Sayu explained all this like it was nothing, but what she said bothered me a little.

Sayu was nice, easy to get along with, and pretty, too. But most of all, she was as considerate of others as you could get. It was hard to imagine someone like her having no friends. The only reasons I could come up with were unpleasant.

But there was nothing I could do about that now, so I forced those thoughts from my mind. Just then, Sayu looked up at me.

“So yeah... I think I wanna go if you’ll go with me,” she said with a gentle smile on her face. “To the summer festival, that is.”

Considering I’d spent most of the afternoon sleeping, going for a walk around the festival at night didn’t sound like such a bad idea. I thought about just grabbing a few casual items of clothing and getting changed. But then I had an idea.

“Do you want to wear a *yukata*? It’s a summer festival, after all.”

“Huh? A *yukata*...?” Sayu’s eyes sparkled. She must have wanted to wear one. “Do you have one...?”

“Not on me. What kind of single guy owns a *yukata*?”

“G-good point... Why did you ask, then?”

“You can rent one, you know. I’m pretty sure there’s a place in front of the station that does it.”

I looked it up on the Internet as I said this, and sure enough, there was a *yukata* rental shop at the station.

“Looks like they cost about three thousand yen to rent. You *do* have a part-time job. What’s wrong with splurging a little every so often?”

If we went to pick one up right away, we’d have time to get it fitted and go down to the shrine before the festival even started.

Sayu seemed a little hesitant and embarrassed, but then she formed a straight line with her lips and gave a firm nod.

“I didn’t expect there to be so many other people waiting...”

“Well, it *is* the only place near the festival that fits *yukatas*, so it was bound to be packed.”

Sayu and I were walking from the station to the shrine hosting the festival.

The *yukata* rental shop had been far busier than I'd imagined, and even though we'd left the apartment right away and arrived before four PM, by the time Sayu finished having her *yukata* fitted and we left the store, it was past six.

Although days were longer in the summer, the sky was already getting dark.

Sayu, walking beside me, made a clacking sound with every step; her *yukata* had come with a pair of wooden clogs.

I hadn't been able to look at her for some time.

"Oh, seems like it's already started," I said.

I could make out some bright streetlights in the direction we were walking. That must have been the shopping arcade. I could also hear lively festival music being played.

"It's really a festival," Sayu said excitedly, and I chuckled.

"What are you talking about? You're already in a *yukata*."

"It just...didn't feel real until now," Sayu replied, giggling. "You were like, 'Let's go to the festival!' and then, 'You should wear a *yukata*!' and then I was getting it fitted, but I guess it never really hit me where we were headed."

"How? We're practically there already."

"Yeah. There's a real festival over there, and we're going, huh?"

She said it like she was double-checking everything, and her shoulders shook. I might not have been looking at her, but I was sure she had that carefree smile on her face.

The lights and festival music drew closer and closer, and at last the shopping arcade was just around the corner. For some reason, neither of us spoke as we turned into the arcade.

Our surroundings suddenly got a lot brighter, and everything felt livelier.

"Whoa..."

I heard Sayu let out a gasp of astonishment from beside me.

The shopping arcade was packed. I had no idea so many people lived in this area.

"Ha-ha..."

Sayu picked up her pace a little and walked out in front of me, her mouth hanging open. Her walk slowly became a trot, and her eyes glistened with wonder as she took in all the sights around her. Seeing this brought home what she'd said earlier: She really *hadn't* been to a festival since starting high school. The look on her face was like a child's on their first trip to a theme park.

Having taken a look around, she suddenly turned back to face me. Then she flashed me a carefree smile.

"It's amazing!"

That was when I finally got a proper look at Sayu in her *yukata*.

The orange kimono glowed in the shopping arcade lights. Her hair, which usually fell simply about her shoulders, was done up and held in place with a hair clip of some kind. The light layer of makeup she wore sparkled in the festival lighting.

"Y-yeah... It is."

I found myself looking away as I replied.

"Hey, Mr. Yoshida."

I thought Sayu was still a few steps ahead, but before I knew it, she popped up right in front of me. She forced her way into my field of vision and peered at my face.

"What do you think of my *yukata*?"

She'd finally asked. I'd avoided the topic when she came out of the store after having it fitted, and I'd avoided it as we made our way to the shopping arcade, too.

The truth was that it suited her astonishingly well.

There was a grown-up atmosphere to her appearance—far removed from my own mental image of a *yukata*-clad high school student—but at the same time, she still possessed a certain youthfulness, like a high schooler. The bright orange color of the fabric brought out her natural attributes even more, and it had me flustered from the moment I saw it.

"Hey, you haven't looked at me once since we left the shop," Sayu said sulkily.

When I finally turned toward her, she gently lifted up her sleeves to show off her attire, then asked me again, "What do you think?"

I stared. It felt like all the lights around us were pointed right at her. She consumed my vision, and the surrounding scenery became no more than a

hazy backdrop.

“You’re beautiful,” I replied without realizing what I was saying.

Sayu’s mouth fell open in amazement. For a few seconds, I thought back over what I’d just said.

Then, at almost the exact same moment, both our faces went red.

What was I doing, saying stuff like that to a high schooler? I should have just kept things simple and said she looked cute. My comment must have come as a surprise to Sayu, too, because her face had turned beet red. However, while I’d immediately averted my gaze, she had continued to stare straight at my face. I didn’t need to look at her to know her eyes were fixed on my flushed cheeks.

“Does that mean...I’m...”

Sayu started to ask me something, her voice faint. But as quiet as she was, her words rang loud and clear in my ears.

“...even more beautiful than...Ms. Gotou...?”

“Huh?”

I looked at Sayu’s face in surprise. She was as red as a lobster.

Why is she bringing up Ms. Gotou at a time like this? I wondered to myself, just as a child walked past me, shouting.

“Mom, the *taiko* drums are starting!”

A woman following the child—presumably his mother—replied, “Really? We better hurry, then!” and scurried after him.

“...Sounds like there’s gonna be a *taiko* drum performance. Do you wanna go and see it?” I asked Sayu. Her eyes wavered for a moment; then she slowly closed them. When she opened them again, she was smiling.

“Yeah, I do!”

“Okay, let’s go, then. It’ll probably be in the little plaza in the center.”

“All right. I’ll follow you.”

I walked past Sayu, who’d been standing in front of me, and started making my way to the plaza.

I could feel my heart beating a little faster than usual.

I’d ended up dodging Sayu’s question. It was difficult for me to compare Sayu, who was right in front of me, with my mental image of Ms. Gotou. And I didn’t really want to, either.

However, I couldn’t help thinking my former self would have easily answered this kind of question with, “Ms. Gotou, of course!” The thought

sent my mind into a frantic spiral.

Was I now looking at Sayu as a woman, rather than just a high school girl?

Up until then, I'd thought of high school girls simply as high school girls and nothing more; they were just kids a whole lot younger than I was. But now, it felt like it was getting harder for me to look at Sayu the same way.

"Mr. Yoshida! W-wait up!"

I heard a voice calling out to me. When I turned around, I saw that Sayu was trailing a little ways behind. I must have picked up my pace while lost in thought.



“Sorry.”

“There sure is a crowd, huh?”

Sayu didn’t complain; she just looked around the area with a troubled smile on her face. The concentration of people had certainly increased as we neared the plaza, making it difficult to walk straight ahead. Sayu was also wearing wooden clogs, so it would be better for me to match her pace.

As I dwelled on the situation, I felt my right wrist suddenly grow warm. That was when I realized that Sayu had grabbed hold of it.

I looked at her in surprise, and she looked down at the ground, blushing slightly.

“I—I won’t lose you this way...”

“...Y-yeah. Makes sense.”

I scratched my nose with my left hand, a strange sense of embarrassment coming over me.

The booming of drums was coming from the plaza. We were still a ways away, but the sound was already deafening.

“Seems like it’s started.”

“Sure does.”

“Let’s go.”

With Sayu’s hand still wrapped around my wrist, I weaved my way through the throng of people.

I would usually find a crowd this big uncomfortable, but right now, it didn’t bother me. I was more concerned about how extremely hot my face felt.

Two men were playing large *taiko* drums as a pair of women played smaller ones, and the crowd was loving it.

You could feel the sounds of the drums vibrating in your stomach. It felt good, and with each rapid string of beats, the crowd would cheer with joy.

As we watched the show, I thought about how a festival like this was held every year so close to my home. Now that I thought about it, I vaguely remembered hearing *taiko* drums like these about one night a year. Every time, I’d think to myself, *I wonder if there’s a festival?*

I'd lived in the same place for more than five years, but I'd never once been to the neighborhood festival. It was like I had no drive in terms of my personal life. I almost never got the urge to go out and do anything stimulating.

However, now that I was at the festival, I found it was really fun. Everyone in the crowd looked elated, and we were all gathered in the same place, enjoying the same event. I hadn't had an experience like this since I left school.

I glanced at Sayu out of the corner of my eye and saw that she was completely immersed in the performance.

If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have come.

My life had truly turned on its head since I'd met her. I'd started eating three meals a day and going out more frequently on my days off. And most importantly, I got to speak to another person more often. I wasn't just a worker drone anymore—I felt a little more human.

If I hadn't picked her up off the street that day, would I still be living my simple life, just commuting between work and home? I still held on to the faint hope my days would be blissful if I managed to date Ms. Gotou, but at the end of the day, we still weren't together.

If I'd never met Sayu...

As that thought crossed my mind, it dawned on me.

The sound of the drums had become fiercer. The performance must be nearing its end. The audience raised their voices in excitement, and I felt like I was the only one who'd been left behind.

If I'd never met Sayu...

When I tried to imagine it, I quickly realized something—I couldn't. I couldn't picture my life without Sayu anymore. She was ingrained in every aspect of it. I tried to force myself to imagine my current life with Sayu removed and shuddered.

In her wake, I saw only myself, utterly alone.

“...-shida..... Hey.”

“Huh? What is it?”

I felt like I heard Sayu call out to me in the gap between beats of the drum, so I looked to my side. What I found made my heart skip a beat.

Sayu had disappeared.

“Huh?”

I looked around, but all I saw were unfamiliar faces. Sayu was nowhere to be found.

“Sayu?”

In a panic, I waded through the crowd and broke free. I walked out into the street, now deserted with all the festivalgoers gathered in the plaza, and had another look around. There was still no sign of her. She should have been easy to spot even from far away in her colorful *yukata*.

A particularly loud drum beat echoed through the night air, followed by applause from the plaza. The show must have finished. Onlookers began to disperse into the street. The timing couldn't have been worse.

I wound my way through the flowing tide of bodies searching for Sayu but found no trace of her.

Where could she have gone all of a sudden? Not much time had passed between the moment I looked at her during the show and the moment I realized she was missing. She shouldn't have been able to walk too far away in such a short time... Unless somebody took her.

A shiver ran down my spine at the thought. I remembered having the same fears when she'd left the apartment without telling me a few months ago. Back then, she hadn't been kidnapped, and I was able to find her in the end, but that didn't mean it was always going to turn out that way.

I continued working my way through the crowd. I searched for her, sweeping my eyes from side to side. Then I caught sight of an orange *yukata*. The girl had long black hair with a brownish tinge, done up with a hair clip.

“Sayu!” I called out reflexively, then grabbed her by the shoulder from behind.

“Huh?”

When the girl turned around, however, it wasn't Sayu. She looked at me, her eyes wide. Upon closer inspection, the pattern on her kimono was quite different from Sayu's.

“Oh... Sorry, I thought you were someone else.”

I frantically let go of her shoulder. A grimace came over her face, and she disappeared back into the crowd.

I let out a sigh and began walking around again. It seemed like the best thing to do for the time being was to keep clear of the crowd.

I headed farther and farther away, still unable to find Sayu. I wasn't much into exercise, and I was getting more and more out of breath.

"Oh, Mr. Yoshida! I've been looking for you."

I heard a voice from directly behind me, and when I turned to look, there stood Sayu. After a moment of dumbfounded silence, I found myself yelling at her.

"Where the hell did you go?!"

"Huh? I told you, I just went to the restroom."

"...The restroom?"

Sayu looked at me with a puzzled expression on her face.

"Uh, wait. Why are you so out of breath?"

"...Oh. The restroom."

So I hadn't just imagined her calling out to me during the *taiko* performance. She had probably just been telling me where she was going. She must have been walking in the opposite direction when I turned to look at her.

I heaved a big sigh.

"W-were you looking for me...?"

"...Yeah."

"S-sorry. I was actually wondering where you went. I guess we both went looking for each other."

Sayu took a step toward me and peered closely at my face.

"A-are you okay?"

"Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?"

"It's just...you're so out of breath."

"I said I'm fine, all right? It's not like I'm a senior citizen or anything."

I turned my face away to avoid her stare, and she snickered.

"You always come looking for me when I disappear, Mr. Yoshida," she said. Then she came over to stand next to me and elbowed me in the side. "I remember when I was talking to Miss Yuzuha in the park and you ran up to me panting. I can still see your face."

"...Shut up."

I'd just been thinking about that as well.

Sayu peered at my face again. Then she smiled mischievously.

"I see. So this is how distressed you get when you can't find me, huh, Mr. Yoshida?"

What she said made my heart skip a beat.

She was right. I hadn't thought it could be so easily put into words.

When she'd disappeared right before my eyes, I started thinking maybe she'd been kidnapped—but was I really worried that she'd been taken away and something bad had happened to her? Or was I just scared that she'd disappear from my life?

"...I guess so." As I thought everything over, I found myself responding. "When you disappeared...I totally lost it."

I looked right at Sayu as I spoke and saw her eyes flicker as if she was shaken. Then she looked down.

"I—I see... I'm sorry," she said quietly, then timidly grasped my wrist. "I...I won't do it again."

When I felt her tighten her grip around my wrist, I said as if by reflex, "Hey... Are you really gonna go home?"

"...Huh?" Her eyes opened wide, and she looked baffled.

I was even more confused than she was.

"Oh, uhhh..."

Why had I asked her that? I had absolutely no idea.

Sayu was going home. I was giving her some extra time to gather her resolve—that was the kind of relationship we were supposed to have. And Sayu had finally announced to me that she was ready to start doing just that, and now here I was, asking her this ridiculous question.

"Never mind... Forget it."

"Uh, o-okay..."

Sayu nodded vaguely, then went quiet. I ended up doing the same.

"O-oh yeah..." Unable to bear the silence, I looked toward the shopping arcade. "They're selling loads of different food over there. Why don't we go and have a look?"

Sayu cast a startled glance toward the arcade as well, then nodded a few times.

"I'll buy whatever you want," I said.

"Th-thanks."

We walked side by side as we looked around the food stalls. There were stir-fried noodles, frankfurters, deep-fried octopus, and chocolate-covered bananas. All the foods you'd expect at a summer festival were on offer.

"Oh."

Among all the numerous food stands, Sayu had stopped at one selling cotton candy.

A kind-looking older gentleman was pouring sugar into the doughnut-shaped cotton candy machine. Smiling, he accepted some cash from a child, then began adeptly working the edible cotton around a wooden stick.

“Cotton candy...,” Sayu murmured.

“You want one?”

“Yeah. I’ve always wanted to try it. No one would buy it for me at festivals when I was little. I remember it so clearly.”

Her eyes narrowed as if she were lost in a memory.

“All right. Let’s get one,” I said.

Sayu began rummaging through her drawstring pouch, but I stopped her.

“I said I’d buy you whatever you wanted.”

“I—I can afford something as cheap as this.”

That’s not the point, I thought to myself. *I just wanted to treat you to a little something.*

Then I realized...I was doing it again.

This must be what Kanda and Mishima were talking about. Well, that explained their frustration.

“It’s fine.”

As I watched the child take a stick of cotton candy from the man and happily skip off, I turned to Sayu.

“I want to buy it for you.”

Having told her how I really felt, I walked over to the man running the cotton candy stall.

“One, please.”

“Okay. That’ll be a hundred yen.”

I took a hundred yen coin out of my wallet and handed it to the vendor, then waved to Sayu, who was standing a few steps away, spacing out.

“C’mon! Don’t you wanna see how cotton candy is made?”

“Uh... Yeah.”

Sayu started, then jogged over to the cotton candy machine.

We watched, fascinated, as the vendor spun a wooden stick inside the machine and quickly gathered a bundle of the sugary cotton.

“Hey,” Sayu called out to me, and I glanced toward her. Still looking at the cotton candy machine, she murmured, “Why did you ask me that

question earlier?”

I’d assumed we’d let that topic go, and hearing her bring it up again made my whole body tense.

I stayed silent, unable to answer. Sayu, however, went on, her eyes still fixed on the machine.

“Was it because you don’t want me to go home, Mr. Yoshida?”

This question wasn’t any easier to answer. But Sayu’s tone of voice wasn’t accusatory. In fact, it felt as if she was inviting me to express my true feelings. That, however, was no easy feat. After all, even I didn’t have a clear grasp on them.

I followed Sayu’s gaze back to the cotton candy machine.

The stick we’d been watching earlier was now swaddled in a thick layer of cotton, almost covering it. Though the process was to wrap the candy around the stick in ever-larger layers, it seemed to me like the cotton was simply growing of its own volition. What had started out as a wooden stick with a few strands of gauze wrapped around it now looked like a giant mass of fluffy cotton—its initial shape indecipherable.

“No... You should go home,” I said hesitantly.

“...Yeah, I should.”

After a slight pause, Sayu nodded beside me. She didn’t point out the fact that I hadn’t really answered her question.

“Okay, all finished.”

The older gentleman thrust a soccer-ball-size stick of cotton candy toward Sayu.

“Whoa, it’s huge...,” Sayu said, looking impressed. “Thank you so much.”

She took her treat from the man’s hands.

“Wow, it’s real cotton candy!” Sayu grinned as she showed it to me. She looked every bit as adorable as a girl her age should.

“Turned out pretty well,” I said.

“Yeah! Thanks, Mr. Yoshida.”

I could hear the joy in Sayu’s voice as she thanked me. I simply scratched my nose in silence, feeling slightly embarrassed.

She tore off a piece of cotton candy, and a “whoa” escaped her lips. “It feels so sticky.”

“Well, duh! It’s made of sugar, you know...” I shot Sayu a wry smile.

"I guess you're right," she said, putting the shred of cotton in her mouth. Then her eyes opened wide.

"Wow, it melted right away."

"Ha-ha. I told you, it's sugar."

Her every little reaction was so fresh, I couldn't help but be amused. Sayu pouted as I laughed at her.

"Don't laugh at me! This is my first cotton candy..."

"Sorry, sorry."

Sayu sniffed, then tore off another piece.

"I never knew how sticky it was. And it melts in your mouth right away, too," she said in a singsong voice once she'd had another piece. "If I hadn't met you, I never would've found out what it was like, Mr. Yoshida..."

And if it weren't for you, I wouldn't have come to this summer festival. Before I could voice this thought, Sayu turned to me all of a sudden and tore off another tiny piece of cotton candy.

"Here, Mr. Yoshida. Open wide!"

"Huh?"

"Open wide!"

Without waiting for me to respond, Sayu reached out and held the piece of cotton candy in front of my mouth. I hesitated for a moment; then, unable to refuse, I opened my mouth. As she pushed the cotton candy in, her finger lightly brushed my lip.

She pulled her fingers back out, then laughed happily.

"Cotton candy is so sweet and yummy."

The piece of candy began to melt on my tongue.

"Yeah..." It was much sweeter than I'd imagined. "It's crazy sweet."

Sayu giggled at my response. Then I heard the clacking of her wooden clogs.

The first summer festival Sayu and I spent together felt comfortable and unhurried. And yet, at the same time, it was over in a flash.

Chapter 11 Lost Item

The day after the summer festival, Sayu and I were exhausted.

We spent the day literally lazing about on the living room floor.

“Aghhh...,” Sayu groaned. She was rolling around on her futon, which still lay unfolded on the floor. “My feet are killing me...”

I laughed dryly. This wasn’t the first time she’d complained about her sore legs that day.

“I told you before—if they hurt that badly, then go buy some ointment or a cold compress.”

“...I don’t wanna move.”

This, too, was a conversation we’d had a few times already.

Sayu was unaccustomed to wearing wooden clogs, and the hours of walking she’d done the previous day had left painful spots where the straps had rubbed against her skin, in addition to her sore calves.

Normally, I would’ve offered to go buy something for her, but today was different. I was drained, too, and I couldn’t bring myself to move.

I wasn’t a big fan of crowds in the first place. Even standing around at a busy central station was enough to wear me down. Despite this, I’d still gone to a festival that was the equivalent of being at a train station in the heart of the city—no, in some places, the crowds had been even denser.

It was the next day, and I was still feeling mentally and physically fatigued. I’d definitely overexerted myself.

“Those other high school girls must be having a hard time putting their shoes on today, too,” said Sayu. “They were running around even more than me.”

“Maybe... But the ones who go every year must be pretty used to clogs, right?”

“Good point. They must be experts... I could never top them.”

Sayu puckered her lips in a pout as she rolled around on her futon.

I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye and frowned—she was obviously more exhausted than I had ever seen her before.

Our most pressing issue of the moment was what to do about dinner. By the time we woke up, it was already lunchtime, so we decided to skip breakfast. For lunch, we opted to simply eat the remaining rice from the cooker and have some leftovers from the fridge as our side dishes. However, that meant we’d cleared out the fridge at lunchtime, and there was nothing left for dinner.

Considering how tired she was, it seemed cruel to force Sayu to stand in the kitchen and cook a meal for us. Just as I started to think about ordering delivery, my smartphone began to vibrate.

“Whah?”

I groaned despite myself. I couldn’t think of anyone who would go out of their way to contact me personally on the weekend; that meant this had to be some useless newsletter, spam, or something from an advertising account on the messaging app. Either way, it was a nuisance to have to check my phone just to delete the message, so hearing it vibrate got me pretty annoyed.

That said, I needed to at least *check* it. If I didn’t and it turned out to be something important, I’d be in trouble. I picked up my phone and peered at it.

The message had come from someone unexpected.

“...What?”

I tapped the screen and opened it up.

Sorry for disturbing you, Yoshida.

That was the beginning of a lengthy message I’d just received from Kanda. Her icon, that image of a man wearing a dress shirt taken from behind, caught my attention.

As I continued to read the message, it quickly became clear that she’d forgotten something at the office.

Since the office was generally closed on weekends and holidays, you had to bring your company card to the security guard and register your ID to get into the building if you needed something. The building’s interior security

system was relatively complicated, and most of the doors required you to scan your card to go through.

However, since Kanda had only just transferred to our branch, she hadn't yet received her security card, and she'd apparently been borrowing a guest pass each morning and then returning it at the end of the day.

In other words, she had no way to get into the office on weekends. That was why she'd gotten in touch with me, the only colleague she had exchanged contact info with, to ask for help.

It wasn't that I didn't want to help her—I did. I just felt so sluggish. Considering it wasn't an emergency, I honestly didn't want to leave the apartment.

I understand the situation, but can't you just get it when you go to work tomorrow?

I sent my reply, then dropped my phone onto the bed, only to have it begin vibrating again no more than a few seconds later.

"That was fast," I muttered to myself as I picked my phone back up.

I forgot my wallet.

Her follow-up message took me by surprise.

You forgot your wallet and only realized today? If you'd asked me yesterday...

A few seconds later, she replied again.

I slept all day yesterday. I didn't need to use my wallet.

Oh, you don't say?

As shocking as this was, now that I thought about it, I would have done the same if I hadn't come up with the idea of going to the festival last night.

Do you really need it?

I have nothing to eat.

Before I had a chance to reply, she followed up with another message.

You don't want to go out that badly, huh?

Although I didn't appreciate her tone, considering *she* was the one asking *me* for help, it was true I was acting curiously reticent to assist somebody in need. Besides, there was no way Kanda could have known how tired I was.

"Haah..." I sighed, then dragged myself out of bed.

I had no desire to go out whatsoever, but if she needed to eat, there wasn't much else that could be done.

Let's meet in an hour in front of the office building.

With that message sent, I dropped my phone on the bed again.

"Sorry. I gotta go out for a bit."

Sayu raised her head in surprise and looked at me.

“Huh? Why’s that? Until a moment ago, you seemed like you didn’t want to move at all.”

“Someone needs help. I gotta swing by the office.”

“I didn’t think people went to work on their days off.”

“It’s not for work. Just someone being careless. I gotta let a coworker in to grab something they forgot.”

Sayu frowned, clearly skeptical.

“Is that really your job, Mr. Yoshida?”

“I thought the same thing.”

Sayu had a point. I never should have let Kanda have my contact information.

“But it doesn’t seem like anyone else is able to go.”

I ran a hand over my chin as I spoke. As expected, I could hear my stubble scratching against my fingers. I sighed again.

Heading for the washroom, I wondered idly why I needed to shave on a day off. As I picked up my electric razor, a sudden thought stopped me in my tracks. I’d been contacted out of the blue, and it wasn’t even for work—no one would be angry if I showed up with stubble.

I put the electric razor back in its place and stared at it silently for a few seconds.

Nah. I’d better shave after all.

I turned on the razor and placed it against my chin. The sound of the motor in the shaver itself and the buzzing sound of the blade against my facial hair combined and echoed off the washroom walls. When I’d first used an electric razor, I was surprised by how loud it was, but I’d since grown accustomed to it.

After Sayu pointed out that facial hair didn’t suit me, I began shaving every day before work. Now that it was part of my routine, I felt restless if I left home without doing it.

Although I wasn’t going to work and had no particular reason to shave, the thought of meeting Kanda with stubble on my face made me feel strangely unsettled. It might be annoying to go out of my way to shave on my day off, but at the same time, it wasn’t a big inconvenience, either.

After shaving, I grabbed some clothes from my closet. There was no need to wear a suit if I wasn’t working, but it wouldn’t feel right to turn up at the

office in just a T-shirt and shorts, so I settled for jeans and a vertical-striped polo shirt—something close to business casual.

Once dressed, I took my wallet and train pass from my work bag. This earned a glance from Sayu, who was now fidgeting restlessly.

“Is this gonna take long?”

“Nah, it shouldn’t. We just need to grab something from the office.”

“Okay. Take care.”

After that simple good-bye, she dropped her head back onto the futon with a flop. I couldn’t help but chuckle as I watched her. This might be the first time I’d seen her so openly and honestly exhausted.

“Okay, I’m off.”

“See you later.”

I smiled wryly at her weary reply, then opened the front door and headed out.

As I’d thought, my body was so sluggish, I was loath to take a single step.

I’ll just get this over with and come back as fast as I can, I resolved.

“I just knooow it’s Kandaaa...,” I said aloud as I rolled around on my futon, taking advantage of the fact the apartment was now empty.

“He shaved before he left, even though he’s not going to work. He may have acted like he was super annoyed, but I wonder how he *really* feels.”

After voicing the gloomy thoughts in my head, I felt a little better.

“He said it wouldn’t take long, but I know it will. And I bet they’re gonna eat dinner together before he comes hooome!” I said, raising my voice slightly as I rolled onto my back. I sighed. “Whaaat am I even doing...?”

I was disgusted at how childish I was acting. I’d been feeling a little weird ever since we went to the festival—saying things I wouldn’t normally say and asking Mr. Yoshida questions I wouldn’t normally ask.

“You’re beautiful.”

Those words Mr. Yoshida had said to me, looking dumbstruck, replayed in my mind. I shook my head furiously.

He'd always been in love with Ms. Gotou, and he still was. She said she felt the same way about him, too. Nothing should be able to come between them.

My foolish thoughts had distracted me from the pain in my feet, and I was able to lift myself off the floor. As I did so, I felt my brain steadily begin to return to normal.

"Well, I'll have to wait and see if Mr. Yoshida will be home for dinner, but..."

I stood up and went over to check what was in the fridge, even though I had a general idea already.

"Yep, still empty."

When I opened the door and looked inside, I could see there was nothing to eat as a side dish or any ingredients to put one together. The only things left were a few cans of beer and some condiments that needed to be kept refrigerated.

"I can't make dinner with any of this..."

I closed the fridge door and hummed in thought.

If Mr. Yoshida ended up eating out, I could probably afford to go without dinner. But I'd still have nothing for breakfast the following morning. Mr. Yoshida was working the next day, too, so I'd need to make him a proper breakfast and lunch box.

The thought of asking him to pick up groceries on his way back had briefly crossed my mind, but he was already going out of his way on his day off, so it wouldn't feel right to ask him to bring home a heavy load of groceries as well.

"I guess I need to go shopping..."

I looked down at my aching feet and frowned.

"Seems like I had a little too much fun..." I said to myself before taking off my loungewear. As I stood there in my undergarments, I realized I needed to contact Mr. Yoshida before I went anywhere, so I picked up my phone to send him a message.

I need to buy some ingredients so I can cook, so I'm going out for a little while, too. I think I'll get home before you do, but I wanted to contact you just in case.

I quickly typed out the message, then pressed Send. Mr. Yoshida was probably on the train already, because it immediately showed as read—he must have noticed the message the moment his phone vibrated.

A few seconds later, he responded.

Got it, thanks.

I checked the message, then put the phone on the table.

Opening the closet, I took out a few of my clothes from the corner.

I was going to wear a pair of capri skinny jeans and a thin white tunic. I put on a white cami underneath so my bra wouldn't show, then threw the tunic on over the top.

Apart from the cami, Mr. Yoshida had bought all of this for me. Whenever the season changed, he would ask me, "Don't you need some new clothes?" before I even had the chance to mention it myself. While part of me felt bad about this, an equal part of me was grateful.

Whenever I thought about my life with Mr. Yoshida, I would remember my brother's visit to the convenience store the other day and feel a sharp pain in my stomach.

Mr. Yoshida had truly given me so many things and taught me so much. I found myself wondering what I was doing to repay him.

I wanted to pay him back as much as I could, but my brother showing up had made me realize something: I didn't have much time left with Mr. Yoshida.

Since I had no idea how long we'd be able to stay together, I decided to do whatever I could to give back while I still had time.

"First things first," I muttered to myself, picking up my phone from the table and putting it in my jeans pocket. "A delicious meal!"

I needed to do my best with the first job Mr. Yoshida had given me—the housework.

Practically forgetting about the pain I'd felt in my feet just moments ago, I stepped out the door with an uncharacteristically intense burst of enthusiasm.

Chapter 12 Goal

“You’re a real lifesaver—I mean it. Thank you so much,” Kanda said listlessly. I gave her a wry smile and nodded.

“No worries. Nothing you can do until you have an employee card.”

“For real. They told me it’d be ready last week, but here we are, I guess.” She frowned and put on a sullen expression. “Well, it was me who forgot my wallet, so I guess it’s still my fault.”

“And it took you more than a day to realize it, too. That’s impressive.”

“That’s what you get for keeping your train pass and wallet separate,” Kanda said, as if someone else had done it. Then she stretched, letting out a small groan. I watched her out of the corner of my eye and raised a hand to wave.

“Okay, I’d better be off, then.”

I wanted to hurry home and lie back down. Sayu was out buying groceries, so I didn’t have to worry about dinner anymore. That said, Sayu had seemed pretty exhausted when I left the apartment, so it must’ve taken some willpower for her to drag herself out the door to go shopping. I didn’t think she’d buy anything besides what she needed for dinner, so I figured I’d pick up something sweet for her.

As I thought about this and started to walk away, I felt someone tug at the collar of my shirt and grunted in surprise.

“Hold your horses!”

I turned around in a panic to find Kanda staring at me with a frown on her face.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re going home?”

“Yes. I’ve got nothing else to do today.”

“You can’t. Let me treat you to dinner, at least.”

“Uhhh...”

Considering the context, she was obviously suggesting this as a way to repay me, but I would have preferred if she’d just let me go home.

She looked at me skeptically for a moment, then burst out laughing.

“Ah-ha-ha! I’ve never seen someone look so annoyed at being invited out to dinner—and getting treated to it, no less!” Kanda giggled and poked me in the side. “What’s the problem? Join me. You don’t want to make me the kind of woman who calls her colleague out on his day off and doesn’t show him how grateful she is, do you?”

“Haah... This whole payback thing is just a front, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I think you’re finally starting to get it.”

So she wasn’t going to deny it.

Ultimately, I bet she just wanted to grab a meal on the way home since she’d already gone to the trouble of going out. And while she was at it, she’d be repaying the debt she now owed me. Though she often made a show out of acting impulsively, I sometimes wondered if Kanda was actually kind of manipulative. It was hard to tell.

Either way, I predicted that continuing this back-and-forth would get me nowhere, so I resigned myself to my fate.

“Okay, then. If you insist.”

Kanda nodded in a show of satisfaction before heading off.

Watching her out of the corner of my eye, I casually whipped my phone out and messaged Sayu. I felt a twinge of regret knowing she had gone to the trouble of going shopping for me, but I was also strangely confident she would understand.

“What do you want to eat?”

“Nothing in particular. I’m fine having whatever you want, Kanda.”

“Like I said, this is my way of repaying you, so it has to be your pick.”

“Wasn’t that just a front...?”

“You’re so rude. I *do* actually want to thank you, you know.” She pouted. “And besides...” she added, a little quieter, “if you don’t follow through, then it’s not even a front. It’s just a bluff.” Her tone sounded a little different from the humorous one she’d been using just a few moments before. Finding this strange, I glanced at her profile, but the expression on her face was indecipherable.

“So, where to?” Perhaps having sensed my gaze, she turned to face me, smirking. “It’s got to be meat at a time like this, right?”

“Sounds good. Grilled meat always tastes best when you have it at a restaurant with a proper charcoal grill.”

“All right, it’s decided. I wonder if there’s a barbecue restaurant around here?”

“Oh, there’s a place I go pretty often,” I said.

Kanda flashed me a suggestive smile and cocked her head. “You do, huh? With whooo?”

“W-with whoever!”

I couldn’t bring myself to say I went with Ms. Gotou, and I felt it was mean of her to ask me when she half knew the answer already.

“Okay, let’s go there, then.”

“It’s back the other way.”

I stopped her from walking in what was now the wrong direction and took off, leading the way.

Feeling the phone in my pocket vibrate, I took it out to find Sayu had messaged me back.

Have a good time! (# -_-)

A wry grin came to my face.

Of course she was pissed. I’d better get home as soon as possible after we’d finished eating.

“Yoshida.”

I heard a voice from behind me. As I tucked my phone back into my pocket, I turned around to find Kanda staring right at me.

I waited for her to say something, but she simply carried on glaring at me in silence.

“Uh... You did say my name, didn’t you?” I asked, and her jaw fell open in surprise. After a few moments of opening and closing her mouth without actually saying anything, she finally spoke.

“How far away is this barbecue restaurant of yours?”

“Uhhh, well...”

This was a surprisingly ordinary question, considering how long it’d taken her to get it out, and I was a little disappointed.

“It’s pretty close. I’d say less than a five-minute walk.”

“Okay.”

Kanda listened and nodded with an ambiguous look on her face, then picked up her pace slightly and came to walk beside me.

“All right, let’s hurry.”

“Like I said, we’ll be there before we know it. No need to rush.”

“Also...” She ignored my reply and started speaking a little sullenly. “When you’re alone with me, don’t talk to someone else with a grin on your face.”

“Huh?”

A foolish murmur escaped my lips, and Kanda looked up at me. This time, she was clearly giving me a dirty look.

“I’m buying your time by taking you out to barbecue. So you’ve got to spend that time paying attention to me—otherwise, it’s not fair.”

“S-sorry...”

She was doing nothing to hide her displeasure, and I found myself reflexively apologizing.

She probably didn’t like that I’d been distracted by Sayu’s message. She was right; it was probably bad manners to be preoccupied with something else when we were out together.

I felt bad about it, but I wasn’t sure how to continue the conversation after that, either, so we spent the rest of the walk to the restaurant in silence.

“This one’s ready to eat. Oh, and...this one looks good, too.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Kanda used her tongs to point to a slice of meat cooking on the grill set into our table, and I snatched it up with my chopsticks and deposited it on my serving plate.

She then gleefully began piling more raw meat on the grill to cook.

I dipped the slice of skirt steak in sauce, then brought it to my mouth. The meat’s juices oozed out as I took a bite, filling me with joy. Grilled meat really was delicious. As much as I wanted to hurry home and rest my tired body, eating good food brought me joy despite—or rather, because of—my exhaustion.

“You should eat, too, Kanda.”

She'd spent the whole time cooking the meat, monopolizing both of our sets of tongs. Since all my superiors, including Ms. Gotou, would make me man the grill when we went out, having that task taken away made me feel useless and awkward, especially considering Kanda was older than me, and it should have been my job.

"There's no need to use two sets of tongs anyway."

Holding one set in each hand, she looked the part of the confident chef. But she was finding it very difficult to grab any meat with her nondominant hand.

"You can just use your right hand. They didn't intend for one person to use both of those, you know."

I reached out to take a set, but Kanda just shook her head.

"I'm dual-wielding. Isn't that cool?"

"But you've barely managed to pick up any meat with your left hand!"

"That's not true!"

She attempted to flip a slice of meat with the tongs in her left hand, but as expected, they trembled in her grasp. After a desperate struggle that lasted about ten seconds, she managed to turn over a single strip of marinated rib. She looked at me triumphantly, as if to say, "How about that?"

"I mean, it would have only taken you one second to do that with your right hand."

"If it takes me one second to flip the meat with my right hand and five with my left, that means I can flip six pieces of meat in five seconds!"

"And if you gave me a pair, we could flip ten pieces in five seconds instead."

"You're always so nitpicky, Yoshida."

She made no effort to conceal her sigh of resignation and placed the tongs she was holding in her left hand on the table in front of me. Then she put down the other pair and picked up her chopsticks. Using them to take a strip of meat, she added some sauce and took a bite.

She chewed on it slowly; then, after swallowing, she cast her eyes downward and began speaking in a quiet voice.

"But...you really have changed."

"Huh?"

She looked back up and stared at me. A gentle smile soon spread across her face.

“You’re more...together, compared to how you used to be.”

“Together?”

“Yeah, together. Before, it seemed like you were just single-mindedly living an honest life for no real reason... But now, I dunno, you seem like you have a goal. Like you’ve got direction.”

With that, Kanda took another slice of meat from the grill. I stared at her blankly as she added a touch of sauce and put the strip in her mouth.

She’d said I’d changed, but I was beginning to feel like she’d changed a little, too.

She was just as whimsical, playful, and mysterious as she’d always been. However, she seemed more relaxed now. I couldn’t pinpoint exactly what had changed about her or how, but what I could say for certain was that we’d both gotten older.

With a quiet, hard-to-read smile on her face, Kanda slowly chewed her meat and swallowed it.

“I knew this was going to happen, but...,” she said in a singsong voice, “nothing from when we dated stuck with you, did it, Yoshida?”

Her words confused me for a moment; then I shook my head.

“That’s not true.”

“It is, though.”

“It’s not. You don’t know how important you were to me, Kanda.”

At that, she slowly shook her head.

“I do.”

“Huh?”

“I know,” she replied, a shadow passing over her smile. “I felt it so much, it hurt.”

“Then why...?”

Why did you leave me without so much as a good-bye? I couldn’t bring myself to ask. Instead, another question suddenly rose inside me. No, it had always been there, but now felt like the right time to voice it.

“Your profile picture... It’s a photo of me, isn’t it?”

I was talking about the messaging app we both used. I suspected it was a picture of me when I was in high school, taken from behind.

Kanda giggled and gave me a small nod.

“You finally realized, huh?”

“I realized as soon as I saw it. But...I was so surprised, I couldn’t even ask.”

When we exchanged contact info, I’d recognized my high school self right away. I just couldn’t fathom why she would be using the picture, and it caught me totally by surprise. I wasn’t able to ask her at the time, but now I felt like I could.

“Why are you using my picture?”

“I was still using a flip phone when I took that picture. I had to move the file from the SD card to my computer, then transfer it to my smartphone before setting it as my profile picture. It was a pain in the ass actually.”

She rattled off these details enthusiastically but still didn’t answer my question. When she looked up to try to steal a glance at my face, our eyes met. She let out a small breath, then nodded a couple of times in a show of resignation.

“Right, you asked me why... Oh, my ice is melting so fast.”

Kanda clicked her tongue and wet her lips with the whiskey left on her mostly melted rocks. Then she hesitantly began to speak.

“Because it’s a memento of the only person I ever loved.”

“Huh?”

Her use of the word *only* seemed strange to me, but my reaction earned a scowl from Kanda.

“Don’t *huh* me.”

“But wait, are you saying I’m the *only* person you ever loved?”

From what I recalled of Kanda in high school, she always seemed flighty and aimless. Everyone had heard the rumors about her many previous boyfriends. Moreover, how could a woman as beautiful as her go without dating anyone else in the years following our breakup?

“I haven’t dated since we broke up, Yoshida. I didn’t feel a spark with anyone... Or, I guess you could say I wasn’t very receptive to it.”

“R-receptive...?”

“Get your mind out of the gutter—I mean emotionally. After we broke up, I wasn’t interested in dating anyone anymore,” she said frankly, taking another sip of her whiskey. “Before I dated you, there were a few guys I felt like I was in a relationship with, but...how should I put it? None of them really *loved* me. They were much more concerned with how cool dating me would make them look to everyone at school. That’s why...” It felt like the

warmth had suddenly drained from Kanda's eyes. "I was never able to like them, either."

I watched her in silence. Now that I thought back on it, I couldn't remember her ever talking about her feelings like this when we were in school together.

"So...when you confessed your feelings to me, it was the first time something like that made me happy, and I was really surprised."

"Surprised?"

"Yeah, surprised... I was surprised that someone out there actually had feelings for me." Her face blushed a light shade of pink as she said this. "And then I fell head over heels, too."

Unsure of how to take this heartfelt confession, I shifted my gaze around the tabletop.

"You were kinder than any boy I'd been with before, and you actually saw me for me. You were super popular with the girls, too."

"Huh?" My voice cracked, drawing a snicker from Kanda.

"You probably never realized, but you were really popular. A lot of the girls tried to get your attention."

"Wha...?"

"I mean, you weren't bad-looking, you treated everyone kindly, and you were good at sports. Of course you were popular."

Despite what she was saying, I didn't remember being close in that way with any of the girls in high school besides Kanda, and I couldn't remember any of them flirting with me. I'd definitely never been asked out.

Despite my confusion, Kanda carried on reminiscing.

"I guess that's why I got so selfish with you."

"Selfish?"

"Yeah. I wanted you to do things with me that you hadn't done with anyone else." Kanda ran a finger along the edge of her whiskey glass. "I wanted to be special. I wanted to be your one and only," she said slowly.

I could feel her words begin to sink in, bringing with them a twinge of pain.

"You really treasured me, but you probably would have been like that with anyone. You felt like you had to treasure me, so you did."

"No, that's not—"

“You’re so kind, you would have treated me that way regardless of whether I was special to you. You’d be the same way with anyone who was close to you.”

“...Well, maybe.”

I could do nothing but murmur evasively while Kanda carried on in her relaxed tone.

“And so I wanted you to be a little more selfish, too. Rather than just caring about me, I wanted you to *want* me—passionately.”

I’d thought treasuring her meant respecting her. And I thought she’d distanced herself from me because I was too intense. But listening to what she was saying now made me realize how wrong I’d been all those years ago.

Judging by how she was describing me, I probably hadn’t changed at the core. I thought back on what Mishima had told me some time ago:

“I was talking about which one takes priority for you, Mr. Yoshida.”

Mishima must have meant the same thing. I found it hard to decide what was most important to me. I was probably just convinced I needed to treasure everything around me, even if I didn’t have a specific reason and without putting any thought into whether it was necessary.

“But you’ve changed, Yoshida,” Kanda said in an exceedingly clear voice, as if to break me out of my thoughts. I looked up in surprise, and my eyes met hers. “It seems like you have something you care about more than anything else now.”

“Huh?”

“All you’ve been thinking about is someone waiting for you back at home.”

Her words startled me. I’d never told her anything about Sayu, so how did she know?

“Ah-ha-ha! Why do you look like you’ve just been busted?”

“I mean...”

“C’mon, it’s obvious. The old Yoshida would never have looked so annoyed when I invited him out for dinner, and you sent a message to someone as soon as we decided to go. It’s obvious there’s someone living with you.”

“Oh, yeah...”

She was right. It was probably pretty easy to figure out I didn't live alone, considering I said I was going home and then immediately contacted somebody when my plans changed. I had tried to be casual about messaging Sayu, but that had just made it even more obvious to anyone paying attention. I needed to be more careful in the future.

There would be no escaping further questions now that my secret was out in the open. As I thought about how to explain the situation, Kanda snorted.

"Well, I won't ask for any details."

"Huh?"

"What? Did you want me to?"

"No... I'd rather you didn't."

"Right?" She snickered, then finished off the rest of her whiskey. "I'm glad you've gotten serious about something, Yoshida. It's made you even hotter."

Kanda looked straight into my eyes and gave me a toothy grin. "Thanks for coming out with me today."

"Oh, no problem..."

"If someone's at home waiting for you, we shouldn't spend too long eating. Let's order some more real quick and scarf it down... Oh, excuse me!"

Without waiting for me to respond, she called out to one of the serving staff who was standing nearby. She rattled off an order of meat and then, after they'd left, let out a sigh.

"Pheeew... That's a load off," she said quietly.

It was hard to tell by the volume of her voice whether she meant for me to hear, but I did, loud and clear.

Before I had the chance to think too deeply about where my next question might go, I asked it.

"What's a load off?"

Her eyes widened. Perhaps she hadn't meant for me to hear after all—or perhaps she didn't think I'd say anything even if I did. Either way, it didn't seem like she'd been expecting my question.

Kanda sat there dumbfounded for a few moments, then chuckled.

"Ah-ha-ha. You really are clueless, Yoshida."

I wasn't sure what she meant, but she paid me no heed and continued to laugh to herself for a little while. Then she stared straight at me, a playful

look in her eyes.

“I’m finally putting my first heartbreak behind me, dummy.”

The word *heartbreak* echoed inside my head.

“Huh? You mean...?”

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Here’s your pork, liver, ribs...and this is the beef stomach.”

“Oh, thanks...”

As if purposely interrupting me, the serving staff began placing the various plates of meat Kanda had ordered down on our table.

“All right! Let’s get grilling!”

“Um, Kanda—”

“Yoshida, if you’re not gonna grill, then hand me back those tongs. I wanna dual-wield again.”

“No, I’ll grill. You should give that dual-wielding stuff a rest.”

She laughed like a little kid as she piled the assorted meats onto the grill. I got the clear impression she didn’t want me to push the matter any further, so I gave in and focused on cooking the meat.

And yet, one thing still stuck with me.

Judging by our earlier conversation, the heartbreak she mentioned must have referred to what happened between us. I found that hard to believe, but since it had come directly from her, I had no choice but to accept it.

But if that was the case...

If our conversation a moment ago had allowed her to get over her heartbreak, then she must have wanted more than just sex when she’d invited me to a hotel last time—she must have been motivated by romantic feelings as well.

I’d brushed her off by saying, “*You don’t really have feelings for me, do you?*”

She never told me how she felt, so there was no way I could have known. I knew that, but I couldn’t help feeling I’d been terribly insensitive, telling her I couldn’t sleep with someone who didn’t care about me. I’d decided for her how she felt.

“Hey, Yoshida. The liver’s cooked.”

“Oh? Are you sure it’s been on for long enough?”

“Liver tastes better when it’s still slightly rare.”

Kanda picked up the organ meat from the grill with her chopsticks, then plopped it down on my plate.

“Try it.”

At her urging, I pinched the soft, gummy slice of liver between my chopsticks and cautiously brought it to my mouth.

Only the outside was crisp and cooked, and when I bit into it, it had a chewy texture. Its bitter flavor exploded inside my mouth.

I was surprised that liver could taste so bitter, but it wasn't unpleasant. When the soft, jellylike texture of the meat met my tongue, the bitterness combined with the umami, overwhelming my taste buds.

“It's bitter...and delicious.”

Kanda nodded in agreement, and a carefree smile came to her face.

“Told you so.”

If I had gone with her to the hotel that day, would we be on our way to a new future together right now?

It was ridiculous to even consider.

I'd made my choice. I couldn't unmake that decision, and Kanda, sitting in front of me, didn't seem to want to go over it all again, either.

No matter how much I might regret it, that was in the past now. There was no going back, and there was no point in wasting time thinking about it.

“I used to hate bitter foods...but these days, I don't think they're so bad anymore,” Kanda said, her cheeks stuffed with half-cooked liver. She looked just as beautiful as ever.

Chapter 13 Pursuit

It wasn't bad, but it didn't exceed my expectations, either. That was how I felt about the movie I'd just seen.

I exited the theater, stretched, then nodded to myself.

Well, at least it was exactly like the trailer had made it seem, so I didn't feel like it was a waste of money. It got me emotionally involved and did a good job making me cry, so I felt like I'd gotten a good return on my investment.

I'd recently started to take work more seriously, so my weekday visits to the movie theater had decreased, and film appreciation had become something of a weekend event in my mind.

The sun had only just begun to set when I entered the movie theater, but now it was pitch-black outside.

"...I'm starving."

It would be a hassle to start cooking after I got home, so I came up with the idea to eat somewhere near the station and began looking around. Come to think of it, I didn't have a good idea of what kind of restaurants were nearby, since I'd only ever come here to see a movie and chase after Mr. Yoshida.

I was thinking about what I wanted to eat as I scanned the station for restaurants, when somebody familiar caught my eye.

A girl carrying a supermarket bag was walking in my direction. I'd never seen her in casual clothes before, but it was definitely Sayu. She was looking downward at first, but it wasn't long before she suddenly looked up and our eyes met.

"Oh."

I couldn't hear her voice, but I could tell by the shape of her mouth she was making a sound of surprise. Then she jogged over to me.

"Good evening, Miss Yuzuha!"

"Good evening! Are you out shopping?"

Her capri jeans and white tunic dress emphasized her overall impression of tidiness. I wondered if Mr. Yoshida had bought her those clothes but quickly shoved that thought to the back of my mind. What did it matter if he had?

"Yep. The fridge was empty, so..." she said with a wry smile. It looked like doing Mr. Yoshida's chores was second nature to her already. She looked right at home with the supermarket bag in hand.

"It's really good of you to do all the housework every day."

"Oh... Not really." She shrugged. It looked like my compliment had made her uncomfortable. It didn't seem like she was just being modest, either; this was how she really felt. She was such a humble kid.

"What are you doing here, Miss Yuzuha?"

"Oh, I just went to see a movie."

"You like movies?"

Now that she mentioned it, I realized we'd never talked about any of these kinds of things before. In fact, we had barely even talked to each other. Mr. Yoshida was always on my mind, so I automatically thought about Sayu as well. I didn't know much about her as a person, though, and she didn't know me that well, either.

"I love them. I come to this theater pretty often, too."

"I see... So that's why."

For some reason, Sayu nodded over and over, as if my answer had cleared something up for her. She turned toward me, like she was about to say something. But just then, her face froze. She seemed to be looking at something in the distance behind me, and I saw her tense up.

Curious, I tried to turn to see what it was, but Sayu rushed to my side and huddled close to me.

"Uh, what's up?" I asked.

She awkwardly kept her gaze fixed on the ground, then began to speak. Her voice was trembling slightly.

"There's someone looking for me—behind you, off in the distance."

"Is it someone you know?"

“...Yes.”

I was about to confirm that she didn't want to be found but stopped myself. There was no need to ask when her distress said it all.

“Do you think we've been spotted?”

“No... I don't think he's looking this way,” she replied, glancing over my shoulder. I let out a small sigh and tapped her on the back.

“Okay, you can hide out at my place for now.”

“Huh?”

“If you don't want to be found, then we just need to move. Stay in my shadow and walk. Keep your head down and try to act as natural as possible.”

I instructed Sayu on how to walk like a disguised robber escaping a police siege, just like I'd seen in some movie. The guy in the movie was eventually caught, but those kinds of details weren't important now.

We silently made our way to the station. Once we were through the ticket gates, I asked Sayu, “Do you think we were spotted?”

“No... I doubt it. I don't think anyone was following us.”

“Okay, that's good. My place is two stops from here. You can stay there for a little while.”

“U-um...”

We carried on talking until we were just about to descend onto the train platform. Then Sayu suddenly stopped in her tracks.

She began to say something, then paused. This happened a number of times before she eventually got the words out, though her voice was quiet.

“Thank you very much...”

She offered her gratitude so apologetically that I couldn't help but sigh.

“Haah... It's fine, really.”

I drew closer to Sayu and patted her on the shoulder.

Now that she'd regained her composure, her caring nature had started to show again. It was a stark contrast to her sweet, childish demeanor when she'd reflexively hidden behind me just moments before.

“But Miss Yuzuha, this isn't your problem...”

“Ha-ha, you're not wrong.”

I'd been thinking the same thing. In truth, if Sayu's pursuer—regardless of why they may have been looking for her—had caught her and taken her away somewhere, it would have had nothing to do with me whatsoever. In

fact, if Mr. Yoshida's number one priority suddenly disappeared, it might actually work out in my favor.

Huh? Then why am I helping her? I wondered, then tried my best not to think about it.

More importantly, there was something I wanted to say to her.

"It has nothing to do with me, true. But that's exactly why I can be irresponsible and help you. And that works out for you, doesn't it?"

I stopped there, and after a moment of dumbfounded silence, Sayu gave a few quick nods.

"Th-thank you very much." She smiled somewhat timidly as she thanked me again.

I was implying she didn't need to worry about it, but at the same time, I was reminding her I wouldn't take any responsibility for the consequences. I was sure she understood both these things, and that my saying it would put her more at ease.

In any case, whether I said it or not, I bore no responsibility for this kid, and I didn't intend to take any, either. And if that made things easier for both of us, then it was better to say it.

For some reason, as I thought this over, I began to feel stupid. Who were these excuses for, exactly?

A wry smile crossed my lips, and I glanced out of the corner of my eye at Sayu, who had taken out her smartphone and was tensing up, staring at the screen. She was clearly troubled.

"What's up?"

"Oh, nothing, um..."

She shifted her eyes from side to side, then gently lifted up her phone.

"I thought...I should contact Mr. Yoshida."

"You probably should."

"Yeah, but...how?"

She wasn't making herself very clear. I couldn't understand what she was asking, so I tilted my head to one side and said, "Can't you just tell him what happened? That there was someone coming after you, and you're hiding at Yuzuha Mishima's place, since you happened to bump into her by chance?"

"Errr..."

When she heard my suggestion, she hesitated, still looking worried. That was when it hit me.

She must have wanted to keep the fact that she was being followed a secret from Mr. Yoshida. I had no idea why she needed to hide it, but I couldn't think of another reason she wouldn't want to let him know.

Whatever it was, this was Sayu. I doubted her reasons were selfish.

I sighed and got out my own phone. Sayu watched me, stunned.

"Well, if we don't contact him, he'll just come looking for you like last time."

"That's true..."

"So I'll just..."

I quickly typed out a message, then showed it to Sayu.

I'm borrowing Sayu for a little while. If you want her back, you'll have to pick her up from my place.

When Sayu saw what I'd written, her eyes widened.

"I'll message him. At least he won't worry if you're with me, since we're both women and all."

Sayu gave me an uncomfortable smile and replied, "Thank you—I mean it."

I sighed again and sent the message.

She was just like Mr. Yoshida had said. She should be worried about herself, but she only ever thought of others. Even some adults didn't have the capacity to do that, but for Sayu, it came naturally. I didn't mean that as praise or as an insult.

An announcement sounded over the intercom, and soon after, the train pulled into the platform.

The doors opened, and after waiting for the other passengers to get off, I took the lead and boarded the train. Once I was on it, I turned around and jokingly reached out for her hand.

"C'mon, princess."

For the first time that day, she gave me an honest, simple smile. Then she placed her hand in mine.

Chapter 14 Hot Milk

“Do you like coffee?”

Once we made it to my place, I got Sayu to sit on the sofa while I filled a kettle with water and set it on the stove.

Sayu shook her head. “I don’t really like bitter stuff.”

“Okay... How about hot milk, then? Something warm should help you calm down, at least.”

Her nod suggested that hot milk would be okay, so I pulled the carton of milk from the fridge and poured some into a heat-resistant cup. Then I put the cup into the microwave and pushed the button to heat it.

It may have been the right call to suggest a hot drink, but my room, which had been empty until moments earlier, was oddly muggy. Drinking something warm in this atmosphere would leave both of us sweating. I turned the air conditioner on using the remote I’d left on the table and set it to Dehumidify.

Glancing over at Sayu, I found her sitting curled up in the corner of the sofa, looking somewhat uncomfortable. I could tell her shoulders were a little hunched—she seemed like the type who was always worried about something.

I heard the microwave ding, but when I took the cup out, I realized only part of it had been heated—and to an extreme temperature, at that. I cried out.

“A-are you all right?” Sayu called.

“Yeah, don’t worry. This microwave is just a cheap piece of crap.”

As I spoke, I motioned for Sayu, who’d gotten up, to sit back down, and she hesitantly did so.

After a short wait, I poked at the side of the cup with my finger and found it had cooled off enough to hold.

I placed the cup on the table in front of the sofa. “Okay. Here you go.”

“Th-thank you very much.”

I watched Sayu bow her head meekly. Just as I flashed her a wry smile, the kettle started whistling. Perfect timing.

I always craved coffee after going to see a movie. Taking out my favorite grounds, I set the filter in the dripper and filled it up.

I then placed the filter over a pot and poured a little hot water into it. Once the grounds had steeped for a bit, I slowly added more and more hot water. I loved the smell that wafted up at this point in the process.

“Oh.” A little chirp came from where Sayu was seated on the sofa, and she turned my way. “That smells good.”

“Right?”

“I don’t like the taste, but...I love this smell.”

“Glad to hear it.”

The conversation dropped off again after that. The silence wasn’t awkward, though—it felt more like we were both simply being quiet. Stealing a glance at Sayu’s face, I could tell she was a little more relaxed than when we had first arrived.

The coffeepot was now full, so I placed the dripper in the sink and filled a cup for myself. White steam slowly wafted up from the surface as the strong scent of the coffee once again filled my nose.

I took in a deep breath, then let it out.

Cup in hand, I went to sit beside Sayu. It occurred to me that this might be the first time two people had sat on this sofa together. It had always seemed so large when I sat on it by myself, but now that there were two of us here, it felt a little cramped.

We sat together in silence for a few minutes, sipping our coffee and hot milk. Then I finally decided to speak.

“Someone’s out there looking for you, huh?”

A bitter smile crossed Sayu’s face.

“Looks like it.”

“Sorry, but I have to ask...” I tried to keep my tone as gentle as possible as I posed my next question. “You’re not running away because you committed a crime, are you?”

She shook her head emphatically. "I didn't do anything against the law! I just..."

At that point, she began to fumble over her words. Her eyes wandered around the floor in front of her, as if she was deciding what to say next. I waited for her to continue, but she offered no further information. I saw she was clearly in distress and sighed. I hadn't meant to torment her.

"I won't ask for any details. I've heard the gist of it from Mr. Yoshida."

I stroked her head as I reassured her. She let out a small sigh of relief, then said, "Thank you very much..." in a voice I could barely hear.

I'd gotten the basic details of Sayu's journey from Mr. Yoshida. She'd run away from home, traveled quite a distance, and been gone for months. Now she was living with him.

From that, I could surmise that her family or someone in a similar position had begun looking for her. I bet Mr. Yoshida didn't know the reason she was so reluctant to talk about it, either.

"Well, whatever the case may be..." I continued to stroke Sayu's hair as I spoke. "If someone's after you, that means you don't have much time left."

From an adult's perspective, that was simple enough to understand. However, Sayu probably didn't comprehend what that truly meant.

Judging from how quickly she'd noticed her pursuer, she must have already been aware they'd started looking for her. If she hadn't, it wouldn't have been so easy to pick up on a person who hadn't yet seen her.

She knew someone was after her, and yet she'd still casually gone out shopping. Not only that, but it seemed she was keeping the situation a secret from Mr. Yoshida.

Her behavior seemed far too careless.

But Sayu looked down and replied, "I understand that."

"What?"

The hesitant remark slipped out despite myself. Perhaps sensing the doubt in my tone, Sayu looked up at me.

"Do you really?" I asked.

"Yes."

"...I mean, c'mon. You looked pretty carefree when you were out shopping, all things considered."

I realized I sounded irritated, but I couldn't help it; that was how I felt.

“Mr. Yoshida lets me stay with him under the condition that I do the chores... I can’t let that slip, no matter what the situation.”

“This seems like a pretty good case for an exception, don’t you think?”

Her answer had irritated me even more. It was hardly a matter of life and death for Mr. Yoshida if she skipped out on the housework, and I couldn’t imagine him kicking her out because of it. It made no sense for her to focus on keeping up a “front” at a time like this.

“Okay, so what do you plan to do about your relationship with Mr. Yoshida?”

“M-my relationship?”

I could feel myself talking faster and faster.

“Yeah, you know what I mean. You’re emotionally dependent on each other. I’m asking whether you’ll be able to cope when you’re suddenly ripped away from him.”

What was I even saying? Why was I telling Sayu these things when she was so oblivious to them? This was totally unnecessary. I knew that, and yet, I couldn’t stop. I found her cluelessness aggravating.

“That’s...”

The more Sayu fumbled over her words, the more I pressed her.

“And how do you feel about Mr. Yoshida? Is he just your guardian? Or are you romantically interested in him?”

As I was breathlessly barraging her with questions, my phone, which I’d put down on the table, started buzzing. I clicked my tongue as I picked it up. It was a message from Mr. Yoshida.

Wait, what’s going on? I don’t even know where you live.

He had a point. He’d never been the slightest bit interested, after all.

I opened the messaging app, typed in my home address, and pressed Send. I then put the phone back on the table.

Sayu remained silent the whole time.

“In any event, you ran away from home with some goal in mind, and now you’re staying with Mr. Yoshida. Did you accomplish that goal? When you get dragged home with nothing to show for what you’ve done, will it have meant anything for your life or for the people here who gave you their time?”

It was surprisingly easy for me to shower Sayu with blame. But this was just self-indulgence disguised as a lecture. I knew that. I knew, and yet, I

couldn't stop. I couldn't bring myself to forgive this oblivious girl sitting in front of me.

Sayu didn't respond; she just shifted her gaze around the room nervously. She looked really uncomfortable and like she was earnestly trying to think of an answer.

That was unnecessary. I was asking her questions I already knew the answers to. The fact that she was still living with Mr. Yoshida was enough to tell me she hadn't worked out how she felt about any of those things yet, and she wasn't ready to, either.

Once I thought that far, I suddenly felt really stupid.

I was a pretty cruel adult.

"Sorry... You don't have to answer."

I looked at Sayu. It was crystal clear from her expression that she couldn't gauge what my intentions were. I smiled bitterly and shook my head.

"That was mean of me."

She opened her mouth in apparent surprise and began to say, "That's not..." But a moment later, she shut it again, as if she'd reconsidered.

She seemed to have taken my words at face value. I'm sure she thought I was questioning her out of kindness and consideration.

She really was an honest and sweet girl. I felt sorry for her.

Was this how she'd made Mr. Yoshida feel? This thought made me even more disgusted with my terrible personality.

My smartphone vibrated on the table. I knew it would be a reply from Mr. Yoshida saying he was on his way, so I ignored it and took a sip of my coffee instead. Its bitterness and faintly sweet aroma helped to calm me down.

"...You'd better drink yours before it gets cold."

I pointed at the hot milk I'd placed in front of Sayu earlier, and she gave a firm, silent nod and picked it up. Personally, I couldn't think of anything that tasted worse than hot milk gone cold.

For a little while, we simply sat and sipped on our respective drinks without saying a word to each other.

Now that I'd calmed down somewhat, I took the opportunity to think over a few things.

Just as falling in love with Mr. Yoshida had left me unable to think of anything but him, once feelings develop, they don't simply disappear for no reason. Once something is born, it persists until it dies or is killed.

I felt like Mr. Yoshida and Sayu were tied together by a special bond he didn't share with me. But I couldn't tell whether it was one of friendship, familial love, or romantic love.

However, both of them were oblivious to the special bond they were fostering, and what's more, it seemed like it would come to an end without them ever truly realizing what it was. And yet, neither of them was putting up a fight against or trying to escape that inevitability. I couldn't help but find that frustrating.

The irrational, intense resentment I'd felt a few minutes earlier had subsided, and once I'd come to terms with my feelings, I gradually calmed down.

"You might eventually realize how you feel, but by the time you do, it'll be too late to do anything about it."

I broke our minutes-long silence with those words, and Sayu turned to look at me.

"You're still just a high schooler, so I don't think you'll get what I'm trying to tell you, but..."

The truth was, if someone had given me this kind of advice when I was in high school, I don't think I would have really understood it. That said, it was something I felt I needed to tell Sayu, and so I said it anyway.

"There are people you can only meet now and things you won't get another chance to do."

Sayu looked taken aback, her mouth falling open slightly. I continued.

"Even if you're able to meet those people again somewhere further down the road, you might not be able to do the things you wanted to the first time around."

We're unable to imagine what the future is like because we're stuck in the present. The "present" moves on, and before we know it, time has passed. We don't know how long the feelings we experience in the present will last. We don't know how long we'll be able to spend with the people around us now. No matter how much you regret not doing something at a certain point in time, that opportunity will never come back.

I narrowed my eyes, fixing Sayu with an intense stare.

“Sayu, you’ve fought back in the past. You fought back against the unbearable situation you were in. You didn’t stay and give up—you did all you could to get out.”

You came all the way here.

It was obvious that any high school girl who’d been living away from her parents for more than six months would be extraordinarily strong, mentally speaking. That meant she’d managed to run away from a reality she desperately wanted to escape, even though it had cost her so much physically and mentally.

There were lots of people drowning in resignation—unable to bear their situations, yet lacking the determination to resolve their issues or the strength to run from them. I knew plenty of such people my own age. From my point of view, at least, Sayu seemed to be way ahead of them.

I didn’t think it was right to let such a daring escape attempt end so easily.

“You’re the only one who knows what you want to do now,” I said.

Sayu’s eyes glistened.

“Only you know what’s in your heart.”

“...Okay,” Sayu quietly replied.

“You don’t have any time left... You need to have a good think about what you wanna do.”

When I finished speaking, Sayu, tears in her eyes, looked down and nodded again.

“Okay...!” she said in a nasal voice, still nodding. I stroked her head again.

After a moment, Sayu abruptly lifted her head and looked up at me. “You’re just like Mr. Yoshida said.”

“Huh?”

At the sudden mention of Mr. Yoshida’s name, I let out a strange yelp.

“The other day, he said, ‘*She’s just good at living. Unlike me, she sees things as they are, thinks, and takes action. She’s really amazing.*’” Sayu’s face was tinged with embarrassment as she imitated Mr. Yoshida’s tone of voice.

“Oh... I see...”

I could feel my cheeks flush at her unexpected words. I’d never known Mr. Yoshida saw me like that.

I sensed Sayu looking at me and turned toward her. What I saw made my heart skip a beat.

She was gazing at me with an expression I can only describe as *charming*, though the slight furrow in her brow added a tinge of sorrow to it.

Looking at her, I felt something click into place.

Sayu had apparently met Ms. Gotou. At the time, she must have noticed the other woman had at least some interest in Mr. Yoshida. And Sayu and I had ended up pouring our hearts out to each other that evening in the park, not realizing we were talking about the same person. In other words, she knew how I felt about Mr. Yoshida as well.

In that case, could it be she was more certain of her feelings than I'd assumed? Maybe she'd already realized what she felt for him... And yet...

"Sayu."

"Yes?"

I called out to her, and she naturally tilted her head in question. The ambiguous expression she'd been wearing just moments earlier had vanished.

"Are you...?"

Just as I began to speak, the intercom started ringing.

I glanced at my smartphone and saw the screen had lit up.

I'm here.

It was a message from Mr. Yoshida.

"...That was way too fast."

Wondering if he'd run all the way here, I headed to the entryway and opened the front door.

"...Hey."

"That was fast."

As expected, Mr. Yoshida's breathing was ragged as he stood in the doorway. There was a note of irritation in his voice.

"Where's Sayu?"

"...Haah. She's here. We ran into each other in front of the station, talked for a bit, and then I invited her over. Right?! Tell him, Sayu!" I said in a loud voice, looking back at her. She stuck her head out so we'd be able to see her from the entryway and nodded, saying, "Th-that's right!"

Unlike Mr. Yoshida, Sayu didn't need any signals to know she was supposed to play along, so it was easy. She seemed surprisingly accustomed to situations like this, considering what an honest person she was.

I looked back at Mr. Yoshida and immediately wished I hadn't. I really should've waited to turn around.

I'd seen the look he had on his face before in movies. It was the one the protagonist wore when they were reunited, at long last, with the love of their life. I thought I already understood, just from the way he acted, how important a presence Sayu had become in Mr. Yoshida's life. But seeing this unrestrained show of emotion right before my eyes shocked me.

"...Are you coming in?" I asked, though I already knew what he was going to say.

"No, I just came by to pick her up."

"Of course," I replied curtly before turning back to Sayu.

"Finished your hot milk?"

"Yeah, I'm finished. Thank you."

"No problem... Well, Mr. Yoshida's here now, so I guess it's time for you to go, huh?"

"Um, yeah..." Sayu stood up and offered me a bow. "Thank you very much for today."

Her words made my heart ache. What was she thanking me for? I'd selfishly brought her to my place and then carelessly insulted her. I was feeling more pathetic by the second.

"Not at all... Good luck."

That was all I was able to squeeze out.

Sayu started to slip a shoe on with one hand, holding her grocery bag in the other. Mr. Yoshida gave her a brief glance, then scooped up the bag without a word.

"Th-thanks."

"Hurry up and get your shoes on."

I found myself looking away so I didn't have to watch them interact. I had mixed feelings about how natural they seemed together.

Sayu finally finished putting on her shoes and stood back up.

"Thanks for having me over."

"No problem. See you."

I had my doubts about whether we'd ever see each other again, but I said it anyway. She smiled and nodded, adding, "See you."

"And I'll see you tomorrow," Mr. Yoshida said, looking at me and waving.

"Oh. Don't stalk me now that you know my address, okay?"

"You know I won't, dummy."

"Heh-heh. Good night, then," I said casually, dodging his gaze and shutting the door. I could hear their footsteps through it as they walked away.

After a few seconds, silence fell, and the strength drained from my legs. I collapsed onto the floor and sat down in the entryway.

"...It's not fair," I mumbled despite myself. "Why? Why is it so unfair?"

I felt the corners of my eyes grow hot, and before long, tears were streaming down my cheeks. My vision began to blur.

When I fell in love with Mr. Yoshida, he had already long since fallen head over heels for Ms. Gotou. There wasn't much I could do about that; they'd known each other since before I joined the company, and they'd spent so much of their work life together. It's not like I could go back in time and come between them. I'd finally made peace with the reality that he'd spent more time with her, and my only choice was to work hard at some other approach.

And then Sayu showed up. They'd met through pure coincidence and suddenly started living together. Now she was practically the only thing Mr. Yoshida cared about. His romantic feelings toward Ms. Gotou still vague, he'd started worrying about Sayu's future. And I could tell simply from looking at his face just now that his feelings for her were already only a hairbreadth away from being romantic.

Ms. Kanda, an acquaintance from his high school years, had also come into the picture, and the way he looked at her, too, was completely different from how he looked at me. He seemed mesmerized by her.

How did it end up like this?

"It's all so unfair... So unfair."

Unfair.

The word bubbled up inside me.

"I love Mr. Yoshida, too. I love him more than anyone else does, and yet..."

All I wanted was to shape this passion raging in my heart into something anyone could see and show it to the world.

Mr. Yoshida's emotions were shifting, but never toward me; my feelings made no difference. I only ever had eyes for him, and yet I was so far from the nexus of his heart.

It didn't make sense.

"If it doesn't even matter who he met first...then why not me?"

Voicing these feelings made my throat burn hot, and I began to cry so hard I could barely believe it. A whimper escaped my lips. It hurt so bad.

As the saying goes, truth really is stranger than fiction.

When people form a connection in real life, it doesn't happen like in romance novels. There's no proper foreshadowing, no setup. There's no clear reason for it—people are just drawn to each other and come together.

And that reality was brutal for those who got left behind.

I sat in the entryway, sobbing loudly.

It was the first time in my life I'd ever cried like that.



Chapter 15 Telephone Pole

As we made our way home from the train station, Sayu—who had, until this point, been quiet and spacey—suddenly spoke up.

“Mr. Yoshida, is there anything you’d really like to do right now?”

I tilted my head in confusion at her sudden question.

“What do you mean?”

“C’mon, just think about it.”

Something I’d really like to do? That was an incredibly vague question. I didn’t really have any hobbies, and there wasn’t anything I particularly wanted to buy, either. My job itself was enough fun for me, and I didn’t have any desire to climb the ladder any further, either.

I thought hard, but I couldn’t come up with anything.

“Nothing in particular.”

Sayu let out a small giggle and said, “I see.”

“Oh.”

Just then, something popped into my head, so I went ahead and said it.

“If I have to choose something, then I’d like to sleep for an entire week.”

Sayu cackled loudly. It seemed like I’d really tickled her funny bone.

“What? That’s so dumb!”

“Sorry.”

She continued to laugh for a moment, then suddenly pointed in the direction we were walking.

“There.”

“Hmm?”

Sayu ran up to a telephone pole that stood a few feet in front of us, then turned back to look my way. I stared intently at the pole, wondering what she was up to, before it suddenly dawned on me.

“This is where we first met, Mr. Yoshida.”

“...You’re right. It is.”

Sure enough, it was right in front of this telephone pole that I’d first met Sayu and decided to take her home with me. I narrowed my eyes as I reflected on the events of that night—or rather, attempted to, as I’d been drunk at the time, and more than a few months had passed since then. My recollection was quite vague. The only things that came to mind were Sayu’s simple smile and her plainly visible black panties.

“It’s been so long since then,” I muttered to myself. Sayu smiled shyly and nodded.

After a few seconds standing under the telephone pole in silence, she carefully began to speak.

“With the other guys, I had a different name every time.”

I couldn’t understand what she was trying to tell me and tilted my head slightly. She continued speaking, a soft smile on her face.

“Whenever I found someone new to live with, I gave them a different name—a fake one.”

I understood what she meant now. At the same time, I was reminded of a conversation I’d had with Kyouya Yaguchi. He’d kept calling her “Miyuki.” That must have been the fake name she’d given him.

“But when you asked me what my name was, Mr. Yoshida, I kinda surprised myself... My real name just slipped out. I don’t know why,” she said, squinting.

She seemed to be thinking back on it. A fond expression came over her face as she spoke. I stared at her face from the side in a daze.

“At first, I was upset. I thought now that I’d given someone my real name, I might not be able to keep running away.”

She paused there and looked up at me. With the light on the telephone pole shining down on her from above, she looked like something out of a dream.



“But thanks to you, I don’t feel like I have to run anymore.”

Her tone wasn’t particularly emphatic, but her words seemed strangely powerful. I wasn’t sure what it was directed at, but I felt a sense of determination concealed within them. They rang clear and fresh.

It was apparent she was ready to move forward. Although that made me happy, it hurt a little, too.

Maybe Sayu was implying she’d made up her mind to leave. As I thought about this, Sayu suddenly glanced at me out of the corner of her eye.

“Mr. Yoshida. If I hadn’t been a high school girl and you’d seen me crouching here, would you still have brought me home with you?”

“Huh?”

I was taken aback by her sudden question.

If Sayu weren’t a high school girl? I tried to entertain the hypothetical, but I had a hard time imagining it. As I struggled with this idea, she continued.

“I think you probably would have. If I were an adult, I wonder if you would’ve had sex with me right away.” She burst out laughing. “Probably not, huh,” she added before I had the chance to cut in.

I couldn’t imagine myself sleeping with a woman I didn’t love, no matter how desperate I was. I’d even turned down Kanda’s invitation, so I felt pretty confident of that.

“In the same way...,” she said, almost humming, “even if you weren’t a bearded office worker, I probably would have...”

She stopped abruptly mid-sentence and stiffened up, her mouth still open.

“Hmm? What’s up?” I cocked my head, and Sayu waved a hand, flustered, as an embarrassed smile crossed her face.

“N-nothing,” she said, tugging on the hem of my shirt. “Let’s go home.”

“Yeah, okay.”

We’d ended up loitering around unintentionally. That was okay, though. This telephone pole wasn’t too far from where we lived.

I turned back to look at it one more time as we walked away.

That’s right, I thought to myself with a wry smile. *This was where Sayu and I first met*. This place held an important memory for me, and yet, I’d been walking past it every day without giving it so much as a second look.

I stole a glance at Sayu, who was walking beside me. She looked pretty zoned out but had a faint smile on her face. Something about her expression

felt off to me.

“Hey, aren’t you acting a little weird today?” I called out to her once we got home.

Sayu, who was putting the groceries she’d bought into the fridge, looked at me with confusion and shook her head.

“Not really. I feel the same as usual. Totally normal.”

“Oh yeah?”

Something felt different, but I couldn’t quite put it into words, so I decided not to pursue it.

“Anyway…” Sayu squinted at me playfully. “Did you enjoy your dinner with Kanda?”

“H-how did you know…?”

She pouted. “So it *was* her, huh? I was only guessing.”

“What? You tricked me.”

“Well, then there’s no point asking whether you had fun. You love her, after all.”

“That’s not true!”

She’d clearly been teasing me, and now she cackled at my scowl and shut the fridge door.

“I guess I’ll have dinner now,” she said.

“Huh? Oh, right… You must have gone to Mishima’s place straight after you bought the ingredients.”

Couldn’t Mishima have at least given her something to eat?

As if she had been reading my thoughts, Sayu said, “Well, Miss Yuzuha did give me some hot milk, so my hunger hasn’t been bothering me too much. I’d better eat something soon, though, otherwise it’ll creep up on me out of nowhere. Mind if I make something now?”

“It’s not like I’m going to say no, is it? Go ahead.”

Sayu grinned at my response, then went to the restroom to wash her hands.

Considering she’d been the most tired I’d ever seen her before I left the apartment, Sayu practically had a spring in her step; she seemed unnaturally energetic. I hadn’t imagined she’d be able to bounce back in such a short period of time. Her legs must have still been aching, and yet, she wasn’t showing it at all. I wondered if that meant she’d experienced some kind of emotional change.

That thought left me a little uncertain.

As long as it was a change for the better, it shouldn't bother me. And yet, the fact that she'd experienced such a change when I wasn't around made me a little depressed. But really, the strangest thing was that I was having these thoughts at all. I didn't understand why I was feeling this way.

Just then, Sayu popped out of the restroom and asked me a question.

"If I make miso soup, do you want some? Or are you full?"

"Oh, um... Sure, I'll have some. It might do me good after all that greasy food."

"Okay!"

She gave me a firm nod and began filling the cooking pot with water.

I stared blankly at Sayu as she began skillfully preparing to cook the miso soup. All the while, I couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right.

Unsure where that feeling was coming from, I decided I needed to keep myself busy and headed for the balcony to have a smoke.

Chapter 16 Visit

I thought I heard the intercom ringing.

The way the sound of the electric bell dimly echoed inside my head was unpleasant. It wasn't that loud, but it was extremely irritating.

The intercom rang again. Now I was sure I'd heard it. It sounded much louder this time. What a racket.

The third time the bell sounded, my eyes snapped open.

"What...?"

Bleary-eyed, I rummaged around for my alarm clock. Squinting at it, I read the time. It was seven o'clock on the dot.

"...Ugh. Who is it?"

It was far too early for someone I didn't know to ring my doorbell. Whoever it was obviously had no common sense.

Sayu, beside me, groaned and woke up as well.

"Is it a delivery...?" she mumbled sleepily, and I couldn't help but laugh.

"No one would deliver something this early," I whispered, scratching my head. "...And I haven't even ordered anything."

I figured if it was a door-to-door salesman or something, they would move on if we ignored them for long enough. As I lay spaced out on the bed, however, the intercom rang again.

Understandably, this was starting to really irritate me.

"I'll be back in a moment."

I shuffled toward the entryway, preparing to give the visitor a piece of my mind.

"Who is it...? Don't you know what time it is?" I grumbled as I opened the door. Then I fell silent.

At my door stood a young man in a suit, and behind him stood another well-built man in sunglasses, clearly some kind of bodyguard.

“...Huh? What’s going on?”

When I saw these two men in unusual dress, I immediately put up my guard.

“Apologies for bothering you so early in the morning. I was concerned we might not have enough time to properly discuss the situation if I waited any longer.”

The young man spoke extremely politely. Then he pulled a business card out of his breast pocket and offered it to me.

“My name is Issa Ogiwara, and I’m the president and CEO of Ogiwara Foods.”

“Um...”

I took the business card, now even more confused. Ogiwara Foods was a really big frozen-foods vendor. Why was the president of the company at my door?

As I stared vacantly at his business card, I suddenly put two and two together.

“Ogiwara...”

The moment I saw the name written on the card, my mind jolted into action. I looked up, startled, and locked eyes with the young man, who was now giving me a creepy smile.

“I’m Sayu Ogiwara’s older brother,” he said matter-of-factly. Then his smile vanished. Glaring at me, he continued. “I’ve come to collect her.”

I turned around to find Sayu standing stock-still behind me, in a daze. That was all it took to prove to me this really was her older brother.

Finally, the time had come.

The young man standing before me was the personification of the ticking clock that had been hanging over Sayu’s head the whole time she’d been on the run.

For some reason, the image of Sayu’s carefree smile appeared in my mind, then vanished.

Afterword

Nice to meet you. My name is Shimesaba.

I used to spend my time modestly writing on the web. Before I knew it, it was decided that the third volume of this story would be published, and I'm still in shock as I write.

Summer this year (2018) was unbelievably hot, and I was sweating like crazy as I wrote. There's no AC in my room, and the computer creates even more heat. The best I could do was open the window and turn on an electric fan, but even then, when the heat is as bad as this year, the room becomes like a steam bath. When I jokingly told my editor, "*My room doesn't even have air-conditioning,*" they responded quite seriously, "*You're joking, right?*" I thought that was kind of funny and started seriously thinking about buying one.

Considering how hot this year has been, I wonder how next year will be. At the same time, I won't be too surprised if it's just as hot. On the web, people have been talking about how newspapers from a few decades ago call any day over 28 degrees Celsius an "*extremely hot day*" (more recently, that label applies to days over 35 degrees Celsius). But whenever something surprising happens, that experience is quickly filed away in everyone's "normal" folder. And just like that, we keep updating what's normal throughout the ages... I find that really interesting, strange, and a little lonely.

I hope next year is a bit cooler.

And now for some acknowledgments.

First off, I'd like to thank Editor W for supporting my incompetent writing once again. Thank you for everything you do. I get the feeling I had to apologize less this time around, though, so I *have* made a little progress.

Next, thank you so much, booota, for lending color to the characters with your wonderful illustrations. Just as with the previous volumes, I always get so excited when I receive your art through my editor.

And from the bottom of my heart, I'd like to thank the proofreader who looked over the manuscript even more closely than I did and to everyone else involved in the publication of this book. Thank you.

Finally, to all the readers who have stayed with the story through Volume 3, it is thanks to you that I'm able to keep putting out this series. Thank you so much. I'd be so happy if you'd continue following Yoshida and the others' story until the very end.

I'll finish the afterword here, wishing that chance will bring my work to you again in the future.

Shimesaba

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